最強をこごしらせた
レベルカンスト剣聖女
ベアトリーチェの弱点
その名は「ぶーぶー」
KAZUMA KAMACHI
鎌池和馬
illust.
真早
電撃文庫

The Weakness of Beatrice the Level Cap Holy Swordswoman

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小指と小指を絡ませ、
私達は約束した。
再びこのグランズニールで
出会ったその時に、
互いをガッカリさせない
自分になろうと。

最強をこじらせたレベルカンスト剣聖女ベアトリーチェの弱点

【剣聖女】ベアトリーチェ

【???】ぶーぶー

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（……グランズニールでの
目鼻立ちは装備に依存している
はずなんだけど、
こっちにいる間は
脱いでも変化はないのよね）
「無駄にデカい乳揺らして
回復するだけのフィリニオンに
あんたの役ができると思う？」
【殴僧侶】
アルメリナ
【白魔女】
フィリニオン
「む、胸は関係ないでしょう!?」
「わしに師事すれば
その我流を
一から鍛え直して
やらん事もないぞ？」
【???】
ストリオーナ
【妖精】
メリティアーナ
「ふーふーさんが気持ち良く
暮らしていけるよう、
私ももっと頑張らなくちゃ」

「……巨花よ開け、
七つの系統樹を表せ」
「表に出ろ」

最強をこごらせた レベルカンスト剣聖女 ベアトリーチェの弱点

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illust. 真早

[DESIGN]AFTERGLOW

Introduction: Making

The girl's long black hair was worn in twintails. Instead of any kind of accessory, it was loosely tied in place by fist-sized balls of the hair itself. A ring of bluish-white light spread out around her feet like ripples. As soon as the size of the space came into view, an unpleasantly mechanical and smooth voice came from the heavens above.

"You may now make your initial customizations. Please choose each piece of equipment based on the change to your stats. You may not wear equipment that exceeds your total capacity, so please keep an eye on how much Willpower is being consumed."

Only when she heard that feminine voice and felt the chill on her skin could the black-haired girl see her own body clearly.

She looked down at her hands while clenching and unclenching her fists.

"Why must I start with selecting my underwear every single time I arrive here?"

"Each piece of equipment provides Percentage-type Magic. You may feel as if you are wearing the equipment, but it is actually a manifestation of your willpower."

The twintail girl gave a somehow alluring sigh.

She snapped her fingers and a giant circle surrounded her. Square frames fifty centimeters across rotated around her. Each one contained a sample of women's underwear, so it was a surreal sight.

Starting with HP, STR, INT, VIT, MIN, AGI, and LUK, a list of around one thousand stats appeared and changed slightly with each sample she chose by rotating the circle with her fingertips.

She set up an even larger frame in front of herself which displayed her slender

body in place of a mirror.

In her own opinion, she had a decent body.

Her breasts were larger than average. Larger than average! Everyone around her claimed they could not tell the difference and they always mentioned her narrow waist instead, but they were definitely a few millimeters bigger!! (←Emphasized for importance)

(If I choose based on the abilities, I'll end up looking weird.)

"But you know what?"

"Your question is unclear."

"I hate how all of the clothing I can select is so risqué."

"Clothing is Magic given physical form. All of these are what you have learned."

"I am saying there is a blatant bias in what I was able to learn!"

"The options are different for different Jobs. A Holy Swordswoman is expected to possess only the almightiest and highest stat arrangeme-…"

"Yes, yes. I was a fool to even think of asking you."

After the underwear, she chose padding to prevent the armor's joints from digging into to her skin, boots, gauntlets, other armor, a breastplate, a skirt, *etc. etc.* She constantly swapped things out and spent a long time to achieve a nice balance of appearance and functionality.

She ultimately chose Western armor with a miniskirt. The shoulders and back were left bare, but that was not a downside when defense was handled by Magic.

"Material selection complete. Next up are the color options. The selected colors will not change the Parameters, but keep in mind that they can provide visual effects such as camouflage in some cases. Also, the available color options are theoretically 320,000-…"

"I get it, I get it! You don't have to line them all up!! I'll do it on my own later!!"

The *silver-haired* girl let out a shout to stop the frames from filling the entire visible space around her.

She also noticed something else.

“Mh? Even the way I’m talking has changed.”

“It is not uncommon for the speech and behavior patterns inputted from the outside world to change once the equipment has been selected. Some abilities such as Auto-Aim are directly controlled within the user’s brain, so they take over some of the thought resources and can negatively impact their personality. It can be necessary to recompose their mentality to an appropriate extent.”

When the girl looked to the frame she was using as a mirror, she realized even her own face had changed. She now had pure white skin that seemed to reflect the light and clearly did not belong to an Asian. Her long hair was primarily silver, but it grew red as it approached the tips. The twintail hairstyle had become a straight long style.

It was not that a different body had been created.

There was only the one body, but that one body had been transformed by the equipment.

“Honestly. Why does the appearance have to change *after* choosing the clothes? I chose those based on what I looked like before.”

“It is meant to reduce the discrepancy between the equipment’s adjusted abilities and your physical body. For example, if a STR increase of 300% was left to the original muscular strength, it would strain the muscles. In order to use the effects properly, the size and balance of the user’s physical body must be readjusted based on the equipment. This is not an error.”

(Well, it made my breasts a little bigger, so I’ll allow it. But! But! They were already bigger than average!!)

“If you do not verbalize your requests, I cannot assist you properly.”

“You don’t have to read my mind!!”

However, choosing different equipment would only give her another different appearance, so choosing clothes to match this silver-haired blue-eyed look would get her nowhere.

The silver-and red-haired girl gave up and moved on to the colors.

Of course, if she took the time to choose each individual color, she would be here for an entire week if not an entire month.

“Maybe I should choose from a color palette. I’ll have red for the main color, white for sub-color 1, and gold for sub-color 2. Also, add in some chocolate color to round it out.”

“Will 255,000,000 for red and 255,255,255 for white be acceptable?”

“C’mon, you can do better than that. Like add in a bit of blue and green for a wine red look.”

“The designation ‘gold’ is unclear. Would you like to view the help menu?”

“Brighten up an ochre color and give it reflectivity! What are you, a useless help search window in a word processor!?”

After shouting without anyone to actually talk to, the silver-haired girl filled in all the necessary fields.

Once she was done, she let out a truly exhausted sigh.

“All of your preparations are complete. Welcome, Beatrice, to the Labyrinth and the adjacent land of Grandnir.”

“To be honest, it’s exhausting doing this every single time. It really kills my motivation.”

“Would you like to view the help menu?”

“?”

“You can save any fields you have already chosen and call up that preset next time to omit this work. Would you like to view the help menu?”

“Why didn’t you tell me that two years ago!? Why do you only tell me when I ask, you damn window!?”

All of the frames vanished and white light appeared in their place.

Like the bottom of a balloon opening, the silver-haired girl named Beatrice had her mind and existence rapidly sucked out.

Prologue

I'm begging you. Can you please not do everything on your own? The next generation can't grow like this. I think you should at least stay away until they've had a chance to grow.

That conversation led to a fight which got a little carried away and devolved into an all-out fistfight. It ultimately turned into a deadly brawl using Magic, and as a result, here I am alone again with a victory I didn't even want.

It isn't my fault I'm strong.

It isn't my fault I do so much.

I was filled with anger with no outlet as I left the brick inn and walked along the stone-paved road.

Really, it came down to the fact that my Job was a little special. Holy Swordswomen were quite rare. It was the one almighty Job that let one learn all of the Magic that was normally split between Jobs like Swordsman, Magician, or Magic Swordsman. That may have placed me in a more convenient role than everyone else.

But you didn't get to choose your own Job.

Your inborn traits were applied to automatically select the Job, so it wasn't fair to blame me for it. It was like I just so happened to have excellent eyesight and it made everyone with normal eyesight feel like they needed glasses. Did they really have to get mad at me over it?

Also, all of the items that a Holy Swordswoman could Equip were quite risqué.

What I was wearing was a far cry from the substantial full-body Western armor from the middle ages. As far as defense and armor panels were concerned, it only covered a fourth…no, maybe even less than a fifth of my body. The armor

really only covered my chest, so my back was exposed, the gauntlets were like long gloves, the leg armor was like kneesocks, and it had a miniskirt. Calling it a steel cheerleader's uniform would have been perfect.

"You With the Long Silver Hair", "The Scarlet Knight", "The Deadly Dancer", "The Girl Loved by the Shining Weapons", "The Blue Mind-Reading Eyes", and "The Short Holy Sword". I had a lot of titles and nicknames, but all of those names referred to the Beatrice in all the rumors everyone came up with. I didn't feel like they really referred to me.

Hm.

This isn't good. My feelings are getting a little harsh.

At times like this, it was often better to give up on finding a Quest and instead make a bold shift toward refreshing my spirits. The Magic that supported us was directly linked to our Willpower, so you couldn't ignore the invisible Parameters like your mental condition and motivation.

Although to be honest, refreshing my spirits may not have been all that big a deal.

I left the stone-paved city and made my way to a green hill.

"Boo Boo."

It was the usual place. I came across a familiar face tripping and cutely falling on the root of a large tree.

A small but bipedal figure of only fifty to sixty centimeters was cutely squealing. His face was very unlike a human's. Based on human knowledge, it might be best compared to a baby pig with small tusks growing in.

I hadn't actually checked with a scholar or an encyclopedia, but I was pretty sure he was a Miniature Orc. Just like a hamster, this would be his adult form.

"C'mon, Boo Boo. Don't cry. Boys shouldn't cry."

"But my knee hurts…"

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

Boo Boo sat down and I looked over his knee, but I couldn't find a scrape or

even a bruise. It didn't look like I even needed to use any Healing Magic. He really was a type of Orc, so his gray body was quite tough.

All I could do was stroke it for him, but that must have tickled because he twisted around.

Yes. Boo Boo really is great.

Whether it was a kitten, a puppy, or a chick, almost any small animal was really cute. But they weren't enough for me. For one thing, a kitten's round eyes always gave me a sense that they were doing it on purpose. "Look how cute I am. You can't help but take me in if I look up at you like this, can you? C'mon, give me some milk. C'mon." That pleading look was so obvious and it was a huge minus in my eyes.

That's what made Miniature Orcs so great. The way they had no pride at all in their cuteness was absolutely adorable. In fact, they truly believed they were hideous despite looking like a stuffed animal, so they remained innocent and didn't get too full of themselves. Their pure innocent cuteness would last forever.

"Why are you here, Beatrice? What are we going to play today?"

"About that…"

I narrowed my eyes a little.

"To be honest, I have to leave this place for a while. I came here to tell you that."

"Why!? Do you hate me now!?"

"That isn't it. Now, now. Don't cry, Boo Boo. You're a boy, aren't you?"

Boo Boo kept trembling no matter what I said, so I hugged him from the side and hesitated over whether I should explain my situation to him.

I was simply so strong that I was affecting the balance of the Quests.

The friction with the other humans had grown beyond acceptable limits, so I was having trouble gathering a Party.

I was reaching the limits of what I could explore and what I could accomplish

on Solo Quests.

In other words, I had no more reason to stay in Grandnir…that is, on “this side”.

“Boo Boo, this is only a matter of time.”

I decided to leave it all unsaid.

I only explained the final conclusion to my small friend.

“Time will solve all of this. It might be two years or maybe three. Once the next group of Top Rankers takes over, once the relationships between Quest challengers is washed clean, and once they’ve all had a chance to grow, that hurdle will naturally go away. Then I can return to this side…return to Grandnir and go on adventures again. So just be patient until then, Boo Boo. You understand, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

As I hugged him, Boo Boo looked up at my face from my chest.

“I don’t understand at all, but I decided I wouldn’t cause you any trouble.”

“That’s the best answer I could hear, Boo Boo. Let’s get married.”

That sounded like a joke, but it was really no laughing matter.

If a collar was invented to allow kittens or bunnies to speak human language, I’m betting some humans would want to marry their pets. In fact, there were already some pet-lovers who troubled the government offices by submitting marriage registrations for themselves and their cats or dogs. There were also people who had the paperwork all filled out to allow their long-lived turtle to inherit their possessions. A talking animal may sound outlandish, but it was perfectly possible here in Grandnir.

And if your distrust of humans grew far enough, you would begin to seriously consider a relationship with a non-human. There were apparently a lot of people who wanted to marry a mermaid or an elf, so what was wrong with wanting to spend your life with a Miniature Orc?

“Listen, Boo Boo.” I gently held his small head between my hands. “I will be leaving here for a while. But, Boo Boo, I will eventually return. So I don’t want to

be disappointed when we see each other again. I want you to be the best Boo Boo you can be. Can you promise me that?”

“Yeah! I’ll become the strongest Orc. So wait for me, Beatrice, because I’ll surprise you.”

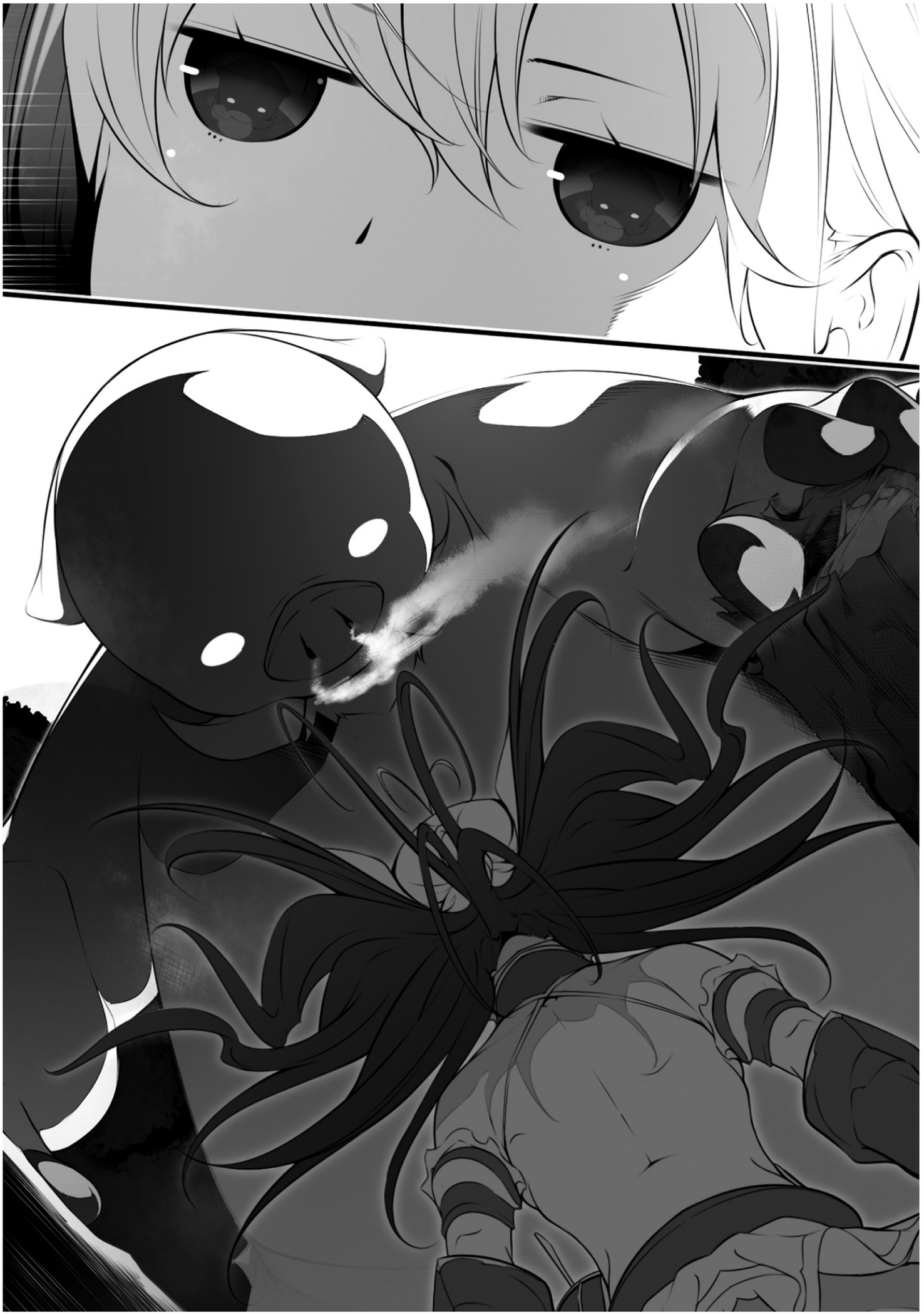
“I see. So you promise, do you?”

“Why are you holding out your pinky?”

“This is how we make promises, Boo Boo.”

We clasped our pinkies together and made our promise.

We promised to become someone who would not disappoint the other when we were reunited in Grandnir.



“…”

The promised time arrived two years later.

I heard the forest’s trees being noisily and roughly knocked over. I could tell the wild birds that lost their perch on the branches were quickly fleeing into the blue sky.

It was like the advance of a dinosaur or giant monster.

But it was not.

A three or even four meter body appeared on the road after forcibly clearing a path through the forest. It had a round body and plenty of fat stored over its steel-like muscles. The Shining Weapon it held seemed to be a sword, but it looked more like a log or steel beam with a groove on the side. It was clearly meant for pure physical fights with no Magic whatsoever. The breaths escaping the face sounded like a steam engine and its pig-nosed face could not have looked more brutal with those impressive horns.

Simply put…

“What is it? Do I have something on my face?”

“U-um, no. I’m just surprised by how big you’ve gotten since I last saw you.”

Boo Boo really had become the strongest.

This was exactly what he had promised, so I couldn’t exactly complain.

So he wasn’t a Miniature Orc at all!? You’re telling me he was a legit Orc all along!?

Chapter 1: Fairy Red and Break News

Part 1

One summer day, the beating of a drum arrived from the inn town at the base of the mountain.

Boo Boo was still young then as he watched from a small hill a short distance away.

The people's faces could not be seen from there, but the lights of the bonfire and festival stands looked like a jewelry box and let him know that a large number of people were enjoying themselves from the bottom of their heart.

Gray Boo Boo had the back of his round stuffed-animal body to Beatrice who sat nearby, so she asked him a question.

"Aren't you going to join in, Boo Boo? I don't know what this festival is for since I only just got back from the Labyrinth, but I can show you around the inn town."

He shook his head without looking back her way.

"I'm fine on my own."

"?"

"Everyone's afraid of me. If I went to the festival, it would ruin their fun. So I'm fine on my own."

His round back looked small and that was likely due to more than his short height.

Beatrice sighed and sat down right next to him.

“That isn’t true.”

She smiled and stroked his head with her gauntleted hand.

“If you clear up any misunderstandings and let everyone know what kind of person you are, you won’t have to think like that anymore.”

“How do you know?”

“Because there’s at least one person here who’s accepted you.”

The beating of the festival drum continued and Boo Boo said nothing for a while.

He stared at the distant flickering lights before finally speaking again.

“I want friends.”

“Of course.”

“I want to go to a festival one day.”

“You can. You can now if you want to.”

He shook his head.

“I’m scared.”

“Of the humans?”

“I’m scared of everyone being scared of me.”

Nothing anyone said was going to help with that. Boo Boo would have to overcome it himself and continue forward. Meddling and dragging him in front of everyone or pushing him forward when he was not ready would be useless.

So Beatrice said something else.

“Then let’s start with the two of us and go from there. We’re already friends, right?”

Part 2

In the dark forest, a Shining Weapon much like a steel beam took out a Great Rocky Mountain King Bear. The Merchants and Couriers who travelled through Grandnir called those bears a “fickle roll of the dice”. The bear was large enough to knock over a moving four-horse carriage, but Boo Boo slammed it back-first into some rocks and jumped before it could even groan in pain. His knee slammed into the monster bear’s nose and took its life before it could put up any kind of resistance.

He was three if not four meters tall.

With extremely powerful muscles covered with plenty of fat, his entire pig-faced humanoid body was a deadly weapon. He attached his metal Shining Weapon to the crude belt around his waist and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“That was some good work. I can eat for three days with this. Hm? What is it, Beatrice? Does your stomach hurt?’

“Ah…ah ha ha…The flow of time really is cruel. I’m starting to wonder if my love is being tested…”

“Hm? I’m not good with complicated things like love.”

“What you say is exactly the same, but it seems so different now that your body’s changed! Wahhhhhh!!”

Beatrice covered her face with her gauntleted hands.

The stuffed animal that would squeal when she hugged it had vanished in the world of the past. Now she could feel an invisible wall of pressure even from a short distance away. Not to mention his bestial stench. She had even heard rumors that some pioneers would cover their hair and clothes in Boo Boo’s scent to ward off beasts.

Meanwhile, he only understood that something was troubling her.

“When you’re worried, a full stomach will get rid of it. Beatrice, I brought a lunch with me.”

“Oh? Good job, Boo Boo. You’re so civilized.”

“I feel like you’re making fun of me.”

“You’re imagining it. I’m not all that hungry right now, but I am curious what’s

inside your lunch.”

Some might wonder why he would need a lunch when he had the Great Rocky Mountain King Bear in front of him, but it was only natural to make sure he had food in case he could not find any prey. Plus, the captured beast’s organs and blood had to be removed, so it could not be eaten right away.

As for the prepared lunch, Boo Boo opened a green basket made from a large leaf with disinfectant properties that looked like something found in a rainforest.

“Raw fruit.”

“Okay.”

“Raw mushrooms.”

“…Okay?”

“Raw fish and raw meat.”

“B-Boo Boo! W-wait. Why not try cooking things every once in a while!?”

Beatrice quickly stopped him, but he tilted his head.

“You sometimes ask for hard things.”

“Uuh… That counts as ‘hard’?”

“I know food tastes good when cooked over a fire, but it’s hard to get it just right. When it’s all burned black, it makes me sad.”

“H-hmm. Well, setting aside whether it’s cooked or not, what kind of meat is it? I’m pretty sure it’s twitching.”

“I don’t know how to answer tricky questions like that.”

“Let’s at least know what it is we’re putting in our mouth, Boo Boo!”

Her desperate plea only made the nearly four meter Orc tilt his head curiously.

“Hmm. Having too strong a stomach may be a problem. I’ve heard necessity is the mother of invention, but does this mean Orc civilization never developed because there was no necessity?”

“No, Beatrice.”

“?”

“I’m not just an Orc. I’m an Iberian Orc!”

“Ibe-…what?”

Boo Boo pulled out his log or steel beam of a Shining Weapon and showed her a spot near the base.

“Iberian is the most amazing kind. It even says it here, so it has to be true!”

The word “Iberian!” was carved there by some kind of blade.

It was in a wild sort of handwriting.

(W-well, that is the best kind…or rather, it sounds tasty. But I get the feeling he’s being made fun of. What happened, Boo Boo?)

There was a big problem here, but getting bogged down in it would not help.

He got back to the lunch issue.

“I recommend the meat. You have to remove the bones for the fish, so it’s only for experts.”

“S-sure. But this is your lunch, so I’ll pass.”

She politely retreated and he closed the lunchbox.

“Why are you here, Beatrice? To play with me?”

“While I would love to, my main goal at the moment is to ‘wait’. I’m waiting for information.”

“?”

“We’ve run into a problem in the Labyrinth and can’t move on. They’re discussing it in the inn town and I don’t want to rush randomly in before they find an answer. I’m not about to become a fatal test case.”

“I don’t get why humans go to that scary place. I’ve heard the rooms and passageways change. I’d get lost in there.”

“Heh heh. Maybe so. …In fact, there are times when I have to eat the pizza or grass fallen on the ground to survive. But Boo Boo, the treasure in the Labyrinth really belongs to all of you. Aren’t you mad we’re taking it?”

“I never go to the Labyrinth, so nothing there is mine. I don’t know what’s

there, so it doesn't matter to me who takes it."

That may have been how it was.

Grandnir was a small island that a human could walk around in about three days. It was filled with diverse nature, but its biggest feature was the giant entrance leading underground.

Despite being a small island in the middle of the ocean, there was a vast and immense Labyrinth that stretched belowground like a spider web. It was rumored to be at least the size of a country if not an entire continent.

The humans saw that as the whole value of Grandnir, but Boo Boo and the other Non-Humans who lived on the island rarely approached the Labyrinth.

The Labyrinth was scary and its structure changed at random, so not even drawing a map would help for long and it was easy to get stranded. But besides those more direct reasons, the island itself had everything they needed to live.

"In that case, I guess not even you would know how to get through Cave 25."

"Hm? I'm not sure what you mean by Cave 25."

"Sorry, sorry. That's the name we humans gave it. Um, every surface looks like it's made of crystal, steep cliffs continue as far as the eye can see, and there's a single stone bridge across."

"What's the problem?"

"When a human tries to cross it, the bridge rotates around. In other words, it drops them into the abyss. It's a simple but dangerous Trap. Plus, it bans flight Magic for a double punch. …We really might have to wait until the next transformation. We might just have to pray Cave 25 itself disappears next time the Labyrinth's structure changes at random."

The Labyrinth was protected by two different things.

One was the Gimmicks, extremely elaborate contraptions that mimicked existing plants and animals. The other was the Traps embedded in the floors and walls to stop intruders.

"I heard something long ago," said Boo Boo.

“Yes?”

“The big traps in the underground Labyrinth are linked to the extraordinary monsters wandering on the surface.”

“Oh, you mean the ones known as Break News? I’ve also heard that the giant Dragons and Krakens have some kind of occult link that lets them power the giant Traps.”

Beatrice sighed, accidentally breathed in a lungful of Boo Boo’s bestial stench, and used all of her strength to keep it from showing on her face.

“But the Break News have so much power it’s said each one has a soul. They were born in a certain environment, but they grew to the point that they can produce that environment. Both sides of the equation exist on equal footing. It’s like the chicken or the egg problem. But it would be foolish to think about defeating one of those to stop the Trap. For one, we don’t know which one is linked to cave 25, so-…”

“Zzz…”

“Hey!! Don’t fall asleep while I’m talking to you. That’s rude, Boo Boo!”

Beatrice’s raised voice popped the large bubble coming from Boo Boo’s nose as he fell asleep on his feet. He rubbed his pig-face’s eyes with his huge hands.

“Yawn… Yeah, but gathering the seven crystals is too hard for me…”

“How much of that were you asleep for, Boo Boo? I won’t get mad, so be honest.”

Suddenly, a deep rumbling sound reached them from the distance.

The two of them looked over and grimaced in unison when they saw the shadow beginning to cover the entire sky.

“Looks like it’s going to rain.”

“I’ll take this home.”

Boo Boo picked up the Great Rocky Mountain King Bear’s giant body like it was a thin blanket.

“What about you, Beatrice? Will you hide from the rain at my house?”

“Hm? Your house? That sounds fun. I accept your invitation.”

With that, the two of them walked quickly through the forest as if fleeing the dark shadow approaching them.

That shadow brought destructive rain.

However, it was not a dense layer of thunder clouds.

It was one of the Break News that moved freely through the outskirts of Grandnir.

It was the Thousand Dragon.

As its name suggested, it was the king of flying dragons and it had an abnormal body that measured at a thousand meters.

Part 3

In what may have been a habit picked up from exploring the Labyrinth, Beatrice called up a map in the air in front of her using illusion Magic. Or perhaps she simply could not relax without checking that kind of convenient service, just like with a cell phone.

“I see…” she muttered.

Boo Boo’s house was near a mountain river yet not exposed to flooding or landslides. It was a decent location. It was not entirely safe as it could easily invite in bears, wolves, or other wild animals, but perhaps none of the forest or mountain creatures wanted to disturb Boo Boo’s territory.

The house was made from the large leaves seen in rainforests arranged into a triangular silhouette, so it was really more of a tent than a house.

“Hyah, it’s really coming down. Over here, Beatrice.”

Boo Boo carried the gigantic Great Rocky Mountain King Bear as he stepped inside the even larger house. Unsurprisingly, the house made of leaves had no

lock.

Beatrice belatedly looked up at the house.

“Hm. This is better made than I expected, Boo Boo. You did a real civilized job here.”

“I feel like you’re insulting me.”

“You’re imaging it. Oh, and it looks like you’re actually cleaning the place.”

“About every three days, I destroy my house tossing and turning in my sleep, so it’s always brand new.”

It was not just like a tent; it was a tent.

There was no furniture inside and it was relatively cozy if one ignored his bestial stench.

“I’ll do something about this once the rain stops.”

Boo Boo set the Great Rocky Mountain King Bear down in one corner of the leaf house.

As Beatrice looked around, she noticed something.

“Oh? Boo Boo, there’s Fairy in your house?”

“Hm?”

“There’s a Fairy Ring here. That means there’s one nearby.”

Her steel gauntlet pointed at a ten centimeter circle cut directly into the leaf house’s leaf floor.

“You normally see these in a bush, though.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen any Fairies. They always run away when I chase after them, so I don’t know any.”

“H-hmm. They are pretty rare to begin with and they don’t like being seen, so they have a tendency to run away regardless… And you have an intimidating presence even to me, so I can’t imagine what you look like to a palm-sized Fairy.”

If Boo Boo knew nothing of the Fairy, then it might be secretly living in the house to prevent other predators from attacking it.

“But if there’s a Fairy living here, does that mean some Crimson Heaven Flowers are growing nearby?”

“I’ve heard of those. Crimson Heaven Flowers are pretty and smell sweet, but you can’t eat them.”

Only one other thing caught Beatrice’s attention.

“Boo Boo, what is this?”

The house did not have a dresser or closet, or even a pot or a frying pan, but there was one object carved from wood. It was about thirty centimeters tall.

“That’s a human statue.”

“Human…?”

“Humans suddenly appeared here one day and some people say they’re messengers from heaven. We’re all too scared to go to the Labyrinth, but it’s said the humans enter the Labyrinth to suppress the catastrophe spewing from that hole in the earth.”

“H-hmmm. We aren’t that noble a people.”

Beatrice placed her hands on her hips and made a suggestion to Boo Boo.

“Now, then. Boo Boo, this is your house and I know an unplanned guest like me shouldn’t be saying this.”

“What is it? If you need something, just tell me.”

“Well.”

The soaking wet swordswoman nodded and continued.

“Boo Boo, can you step outside?”

“Eeee!! I-I know you might be jealous, but stealing people’s homes is wrong! I worked hard to make this house!!”

“No, no. It’s not that.” Beatrice waved a slender hand protected by a gauntlet. “As you can see, I’m soaked. I can get rid of the surface moisture with my fire Magic, but I still want to wipe myself down properly.”

In truth, the combination of armor and moisture was disastrous and ignoring

the issue would leave her entire body covered in athlete's foot, but for the sake of her feminine pride and her sweet dreams, she had decided not to tell Boo Boo that. In a way, it would be even more embarrassing than being seen in the nude.

It was unclear if Boo Boo understood or not, but…

"Okay! Then you can wipe yourself off with this! I always use it to keep my Shining Weapon especially shiny!!"

"Oh…thanks. I know I shouldn't be picky as a guest, but let's keep at least a towel on hand from now on, Boo Boo."

This was her only option, so she accepted the "Item Name: Cloth".

However, Boo Boo showed no sign of leaving. He simply stared at her from directly ahead.

"…Boo Boo."

"Yeah? What is it, Beatrice?"

"You have to know what clothes are since you have that cloth around your waist. This may be selfish since this is your house, but please leave for a moment!! And don't come back in until I say you can! You can't look at humans when they're naked!!"

"Okay. I knew human skin had no fur and isn't very tough, but I didn't know you couldn't expose it to light either."

Boo Boo readily turned around and walked toward the exit.

Beatrice glared at him as he left, but he showed no sign of turning around.

Not in the slightest.

It had been too easy.

…

…

…

"Squeal!! Wh-what was that for, Beatrice!? Why would you grab my back fat like that? It hurts, it hurts!!"

“Boo Boo, I’m not saying I approve of the cowardly action known as peeping. But…”

“What’s peeping?”

“Oh, no!! That isn’t a concept I should be teaching you!!”

“You said I couldn’t look, so I’ll keep my promise.”

“Yes, but…there’s more to it than that! You can’t treat a girl like she’s some old fish bones lying on the ground!! You need to look more disappointed!!”

She knew she was being unreasonable, but she still blushed and lightly punched Boo Boo’s waist a few times.

Once Boo Boo left, the rest was easy.

The clothing she wore was really Percentage-type Magic, so it was only an effect used to adjust her physical abilities. While real armor required a helper to remove, she only had to stroke a finger along her rapier-style Shining Weapon to remove each piece of Magic until she was in her birthday suit.

(Your appearance in Grandnir is supposed to be dependent on the equipment, but while you’re here, it doesn’t change even when you strip down.)

She used the cloth (meant for Shining Weapon maintenance) that Boo Boo had given her to wipe all the moisture from her soft and slender body. Then she switched the Magic back on to don the equipment-shaped effects once more.

“You can come in, Boo Boo.”

When he stepped back inside, he did not care at all about how wet he was. It seemed a solid Iberian Orc could not catch cold and never felt chilly. Beatrice had no choice but to use the cloth to take care of him as far as she could reach. He seemed like a small child as he let her do as she pleased.

“Nn.”

“C’mon, Boo Boo. Don’t complain.”

“But there’s nothing to do until the rain stops. I’m bored.”

“Well, this rain has to do with a Break News, so it should let up once that passes by. Let’s preserve your catch before it rots.”

“There’s nothing to do at home. All I can do here is nap.”

“That’s fine. I’m not about to head out into the rain eith-..”

Beatrice trailed off and froze in place.

Sleep with Boo Boo?

An invitation to his house?

When they had once promised to get married?

But she still had an unmarried body. She wanted him to think that even roughly holding her in his arms would break her. Had she been too careless in accepting this invitation from a gentleman?

“W-we can’t do that, Boo Boo! I probably need to create some kind of specialized Magic before we can become one! In fact, if you lie on top of me, you could easily crush me to death!”

“Hm? Why are you shouting with that hair sticking up from your head on fire?”

“A-ahem!!”

As Boo Boo lay down on the floor to nap (yes, his house lacked even a blanket), Beatrice blushed and cleared her throat to disguise her runaway imagination.

She hid the Illumination Magic lighting up her ahoge and she lay down next to him.

Only the sound of raindrops striking the leaf roof continued.

Meanwhile, Boo Boo asked her something.

“Why do you go to the Labyrinth?”

“Hm?”

“I don’t want you to get hurt and you don’t have to go to that dangerous place. Only humans go out of their way to go there.”

“Well, Boo Boo.” She rolled over to look at Boo Boo who was lying on his side. “We humans go to the Labyrinth because it’s filled with things we can never make ourselves. Yes, it’s to acquire Experience Points.”

“?”

“Nonhumans like you use inborn Skills but can’t grow beyond that, so it doesn’t have much of anything to do with you. But humans aren’t born with anything like that, so we need to learn Magic somehow or another.”

“I don’t like studying.”

“We earn Experience Points from just about everything. Even from eating meals, dancing, or just speaking with you like this. But those only provide miniscule amounts. If we really want to learn Magic, it’s best to acquire a whole bunch of them at once. That is why we attempt to conquer the Labyrinth.”

“…”

“There is a lot to do there: fight Gimmicks, disarm Traps, and find Treasure in treasure chests. …There are even some who specialize in drawing maps or filling up an encyclopedia. None of that data will be useful forever since the Labyrinth’s structure changes at random, but that’s actually preferable when the goal is to earn Experience Points.”

People grew stronger the more experience they earned, but they could not properly receive the experience earned in a different world like Grandnir.

That was why they used Shining Weapons.

Only once the experience was sorted and converted was it taken into their bodies.

That might sound roundabout and inconvenient, but it provided a groundbreaking side effect. Simply put, the experience obtained in this other world could be converted to numbers and artificially distributed. That allowed one to freely extend their Parameters that were displayed on the kind of hexagonal or octagonal graphs seen in baseball video games.

This even allowed a free *conversion of effort* where studying at a desk improved one’s skill at baseball or cooking food made one better at karaoke.

And that allowed people to reach the Magic that they could not use in the real world.

“That is why there is no end to our adventure. We continue advancing through the infinitely-expanding and ever-changing Labyrinth to obtain the Magic we

want and to earn as many Experience Points as we want. That said, experience is a form of stimulus. If you eat curry every day, you get tired of it. The areas that provide plenty of Experience Points change based on the daily trends, so there is more to it than simply continuing as deep as you can. Even Cave 25 that we're currently stuck at-…"

"Zzz…"

Beatrice trailed off when she heard Boo Boo's regulated breathing. She had scolded him for being rude earlier, but manners were not something one could learn in a day.

(Honestly, at times like this, he isn't that different from back then.)

Beatrice kindly narrowed her eyes and touched the Shining Weapon she had removed from her hip and set down next to her. It looked like a Western rapier with the tip removed. She activated it, called up the Magic she wanted, and opened an orange film of light around her. The tiny barrier was meant for getting some rest within the Labyrinth, but the people who spent all their time underground could not relax without it. It was known as sleeping bag magic at the inn town and there were quite a few variations depending on Element.

They lived a life of survival from the moment they entered the Labyrinth to the moment they returned home.

No matter how deep they explored and no matter what legendary treasure they discovered, they gained nothing if they did not bring it back with them.

When exploring, it was more important to master these means of preserving strength than how to swing around a sword or staff.

The temperature and humidity were optimized and Boo Boo's bestial stench was driven out. Her back sank softly down and her mind itself seemed to melt away.

(Why do I go to the Labyrinth, hm?)

She reflected on the question Boo Boo had asked her and her fingers stroked the Shining Weapon that represented her Magic.

(That's a good question. Why *do* I keep doing this?)

And as she began to nod off, the end suddenly came to her world.

“Bghohh!! Bghohhh!! Bshrrrr…fshhhh!!!??”

“Uuhh… Wh-what!? What is going on!?”

The sleeping bag magic was meant to provide the short-term sleep needed to safely yet quickly recover the Willpower at the core of one’s Magic while inside the dangerous Labyrinth. But even inside that, Boo Boo’s snoring mercilessly pierced Beatrice’s eardrums.

“Bffhhh!! …mumble, mumble… What do you mean it only truly begins once you get the boat…? Bghohhhhh!!”

“Wh-what is this!? Is my l-love being tested!?”

And it did not end there.

The second trial arrived.

Boo Boo’s nearly four meter body suddenly rolled toward her.

The orange film of light might as well have not been there at all.

The sleeping bag magic shattered with the sound of breaking glass. She had never seen it break before, so she was almost impressed as his giant form rolled her way.

“Wait, you idiot! Stop, stoooooooooooooooooooop!! B-Boo Boo! I’ll be crushed! My body will be crushed!!”

Part 4

Once the residents of the leaf house fell asleep (although it looked like only Boo Boo was asleep and the scarlet Holy Swordswoman’s soul was escaping her mouth as the giant orc crushed her), a tiny form appeared through the gaps in the large leaves.

It was a girl of only about fifteen centimeters.

She had four dragonfly wings on her back, she wore a white and pink dress, and she had short pink hair.

The red ring wrapped around her right ankle jingled as the Fairy observed the leaf house from near the ceiling.

She was generally checking over the house's condition.

"Oh, dear. Boo Boo accidentally damaged his house again."

The ribbon on the small Fairy's head fluttered as she flew outside, scooped up some mud that could be used to mend the house, and packed it into the gaps in the leaves forming the floor and walls. She tore away the leaves growing mold and added new ones in their place.

This fairy protected Boo Boo's house without his knowledge, but the entire house would occasionally collapse when he made too sudden a turn in his sleep. That was not due to the house being fragile. He was simply too dynamic in his sleep.

However, the Fairy did not seem to mind.

In fact, she even seemed delighted to have more work to do.

Fairies were often depicted as pranksters, but her race at least placed a strong emphasis on repaying both good and bad deeds in kind. This Fairy had once been saved by Boo Boo. He had rescued her while she was caught in the web of a giant spider known as a Ground Spider. …Then again, it had looked a lot like Boo Boo had gotten his head caught in the spider web as he walked through the forest. He also looked nothing like the princes in fairy tales, but the fact remained that he had saved her life.

"That should do it."

That was why she had been living in Boo Boo's constantly destroyed and remade house for about a month. She would repay her debt by secretly helping out in a variety of ways once he fell asleep, but…

"Hm? Who is that lady?"

After finishing her work, the Fairy flew around the house and spotted the Holy Swordswoman in red armor and a miniskirt who seemed to be wrestling with

Boo Boo (or rather, was being crushed by him).

“Oh, my. Did Boo Boo bring a woman home with him? My, my! Now this is a surprise. This might be a night to remember!”

The Fairy initially placed her hands on her cheeks and rejoiced, but…

“This delicate lady and Boo Boo who is larger than a Great Rocky Mountain King Bear?”

When she thought about it more calmly, that pairing did not seem possible.

Also, one of the monstrous bears she had mentioned was lying dead in a corner of the leaf house.

“D-don’t tell me she’s supposed to be a snack for Boo Boo! No, I believe in you, Boo Boo!!”

“Bghohh!?”

Boo Boo’s rhythmic breathing came to a stop.

He snorted from his porcine nose and rubbed his eyes.

“What is this glowing thing?”

“Ee-…”

The eyes of that vast and exceedingly brutal pig face stared at the airborne Fairy.

“Eeee

The giant dragon Break News left.

The pouring rain let up and a large rainbow appeared in the blue sky.

Beatrice and Boo Boo dragged out the Great Rocky Mountain King Bear and removed its organs and blood to help preserve it. Once they were done, Beatrice left Boo Boo's house.

She used Magic to call up a map as she walked.

Grandnir was a small island that one could walk all the way around in just three days, so the only human settlement was the inn town near the center.

It contained brick buildings and fairly well-maintained stone-paved roads. Beatrice really did believe that necessity was the mother of invention. Even if exploring the Labyrinth was not a direct necessity, people were willing to put any amount of effort into making themselves comfortable.

When she returned there, the town seemed noisier than usual.

She visited one of the inns that were more used to gather a party than to spend the night and a familiar White Witch soon noticed her. Her name was Filinion. The woman had long fluffy blonde hair and wore thin-framed glasses. To match her Job, she wore a white cloak. She also wore a far-too-short dress and low-rise shorts. Finally, she wore a white witch's hat with small rings and decorative cups attached to the brim like earrings. However, there was an unnatural slit opened at the chest and the front was too tight to close properly. Yes, leaving the cleavage of her ample bust in plain view!

(N-no, I don't care. I'm above average too! And the Magic I'm wearing has made them even bigger!!) The White Witch specialized in recovery Magic, but her Sparkling Weapon was not a sword or a spear. It was the white first-aid kit sitting on the table in front of her. The box did not contain a variety of medicines. It was a Mixing device that combined multiple ingredients to produce the necessary medicine.

She toyed with the key that hung from her neck by a thin chain.

"Beatrice, it looks like things are on the move."

"What happened, Filinion? If it's about Cave 25, weren't our discussions at a

standstill? I thought we had to wait for the Labyrinth to transform and randomly alter the layout."

"That's the thing."

"Did they find a way to get through?"

Beatrice took a seat and placed a stack of gears on the edge of the table in place of money. They came from within the mechanical monsters known as Gimmicks and they were convenient as currency because they could be broken down and converted into Experience Points (as experience in learning how they were structured on the inside) or they could be Mixed to create rare items for even more Experience Points (and the more complex the item the more experience it was worth).

The waitress carried over the usual drinks. The White Witch named Filinion reached for the cup with her glove that left only the ring finger exposed.

"First, a Party seems to have figured out the power source for the stone bridge Trap in Cave 25."

"You mean the Break News?"

Beatrice sounded annoyed and she activated some fire Magic that created an illusion. It was essentially a generic memo pad that auto-mapped the Labyrinth and helped with the discussions held before fighting the giant gatekeeper Gimmicks that appeared and attacked with incredible firepower to punish anyone who stayed in an area for too long.

A hologram-like image appeared above the table which displayed a diorama of Cave 25, a black form labelled "Break News", and a red thread connecting them.

"I seriously doubt they are, but they aren't planning to put together a large-scale force for a Break News subjugation quest, are they? Surely not! That wouldn't be possible. Those things are paradoxically thought to have a soul. Not even those of us at the level cap can hope to face them, so no one would accept that reckless of a request."

She created a representation of the inn town a short distance away and connected it and the Break News with a red line. She of course added a giant x-mark on top of that line.

Filinion pulled out something like a thick encyclopedia that was hanging from the side of her leather belt. Rather than purchase the information with a giant stack of gears, she had filled the book herself. She earned Experience Points by healing others and creating collectable encyclopedias rather than fighting.

The White Witch opened it to a bookmarked page and showed Beatrice.

“I’ll start with the details of the Break News. The one connected to Cave 25 is known as the Thousand Dragon.”

“The Thousand Dragon… You mean that one?”

Beatrice recalled the pouring rain and Boo Boo’s leaf house. She also changed the “Break News” label to say “Thousand Dragon”.

The task seemed even more hopeless now.

“It is a giant Dragon over a thousand meters long. Simply splitting the air with its great form is enough to create something like a contrail that forms thick clouds. That water dragon lord creates irregular downpours like that. …But what are humans supposed to do about something like that? We aren’t the mysterious Dragon Eater from some dubious legend. We research and research some more to figure out how to *avoid those things*. Making contact yourself is suicidal.”

“Yes.” Filinion gently traced her fingers along her glasses. “But word is getting around that we might be able to neutralize it without defeating it. Look here.”

“Once every ninety days, the Thousand Dragon enters an unexplained state of intoxication. It flies in unpredictable paths, so be careful. Probability of occurrence: 78.8%. You mean…”

“People decided to search out what exactly it is that causes that state of intoxication. And after discussing the weather conditions, the ecosystem, and people’s movements, they think they’ve found the answer.”

Beatrice drew a red thread from the Thousand Dragon, but it led nowhere. She created a box containing only a question mark. Did that monster really have a weakness?

“What exactly is it?”

“This.” Filinion opened a different page of her encyclopedia. “But let me warn you: you aren’t going to like it.”

Part 6

The Fairy secretly flew back to Boo Boo’s leaf house.

His brutal pig face was certainly frightening. Her mind went blank if he so much as glared at her. But he had saved the small Fairy’s life regardless.

It did not matter if that had been a coincidence or not.

What mattered was whether she could repay him with her own hands or not.

“The roof still looks okay. The rope supporting the column hasn’t come loose. Okay, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

She checked over everything, but something was different from before.

She seemed somehow reluctant.

It looked like she could no longer follow her normal routine like normal.

“Meridiana.”

Someone called her name.

Not only was it another Fairy, it was the leader of their group.

The woman had large cicada-like wings, she wore orange clothing, and she had lime green hair tied back.

“Are you about ready?”

“Yes, Lady Morgan. I reinforced the house quite a bit, so not even Boo Boo should destroy it for seven…no, five days.”

That leaf house was constantly destroyed and rebuilt, so this method of repayment may have been entirely meaningless. When Boo Boo destroyed the house in his sleep, he would rebuild it without a second thought, so he had been

living in complete ignorance of Meridiana's actions.

But that did not matter.

It only mattered that she could convince herself that she had done something for the person who had saved her life.

"I feel bad having you do this."

"Please, raise your head Lady Morgan. This is what I wanted and it had already been decided. You didn't actually order me to do this, right?"

"But…"

"The humans said that foul dragon grows drunk on the toxin in Fairy blood. That Dragon constantly feasts on our kind, but that pigment gradually builds up inside its giant body. I agree that we are just a step away from defeating that foul dragon."

"…"

Fairies enjoyed eating the red petals of the Crimson Heaven Flower. The flower itself was not very toxic, but a dreadful change occurred when it was broken down within Fairy blood.

The Fairies themselves were unaware, but it was enough to intoxicate even a Dragon that was one hundred, one thousand, or even more times their size.

“So I will end this in my generation. It will all be over once I am eaten. I will make sure to finish off that foul dragon so that no one need ever follow this path again and no one else must be eaten. Why would I hesitate when faced with such a noble cause?”

“…I’m sorry.”

Morgan apologized even after being told it was unnecessary.

Meridiana laughed and asked a question of her own.

“Is everything ready?”

“It is. The only thing left is your resolve.”

“Then we can get started right away.”

The two Fairies flew out of the leaf house.

Just once, Meridiana turned back toward the house of her savior with a sad smile on her lips.

“Farewell, Boo Boo.”

Part 7

The “?” box had been filled in.

The red lines and several boxes created a completed diagram for defeating Cave 25.

However, Beatrice could not hide her irritation as she spoke up.

“Who is leading this?”

“Oh, come on, Beatrice.”

“I asked who.”

She repeated herself in a threatening manner and the entire atmosphere seemed to solidify. She was not directing her anger at them, but even the other

guests were overpowered and fell silent. They seemed unable to even move, for fear of getting involved.

“That would be me.”

The carefree answer came from a different table.

The temperature seemed different in that corner. Five or six men with mocking looks on their faces were gathered there.

The one in the center was a silver knight.

He had a medium build and black hair. His somewhat sharp eyes were a negative in Beatrice’s opinion. He wore silver armor that provided an image of purity but was actually so polished it reflected and thus rejected everything. He had a large shield, so he was likely a Pure Knight. That was a rare Job one was born with, just like Beatrice’s Holy Swordswoman.

“Look at that. Someone on the Black List comes waltzing back after the heat dies down and now she’s complaining like she knows what’s going on? What are you thinking, Miss ‘Expert’?”

The red and silver glared at each other from different tables.

“We’re the ones that have spent our valuable time searching for any way through Cave 25 we could find, but you’ll still get through the Trap. Really, you should be paying us a toll.”

“The only things in Grandnir we are allowed to harm are the mechanical Gimmicks that lack a soul. We customarily have the Nonhumans take care of hunting or gathering plants and animals, or we at least accompany them when we do it. Do you really think we can kill and offer up a Fairy that can think and speak just like a human?”

“We won’t be killing it. It’ll be committing suicide, so we aren’t breaking any rules here.”

“Did you lead them in that direction from the beginning?”

A creaking sound came from Beatrice’s mouth.

Her back teeth were crying out in protest as she clenched them.

“It may be true that the extraordinary Thousand Dragon grows drunk on Fairy blood, but who decided that the toxin was building up inside it and it was just one step away from death? That was a filthy lie of yours to trick the Fairy into offering up its life, wasn’t it? The Fairy thinks this will prevent any sacrifices from future generations and you’re trampling on those feelings!!”

“Ohh, I’m so scared.”

The Pure Knight remained seated, crossed his legs, and clapped his hands.

“C’mon, do you really think any cares that much about Nonhumans? They’re just monsters from another world. What kind of moron identifies with something just because it acts like it understands you? Oh, maybe the kind of moron that sleeps with a pig-faced monster. But don’t expect me to understand how a perverted woman thinks.”

The men around him laughed and Beatrice narrowed her eyes.

“So nothing I say will change anything, is that it?”

“What? You think we’d stop using those dimwitted Fairies? Ha ha! Why the hell would we? It’s not like this is over once we get to the other side of Cave 25. Surely you know what we’re after: Experience Points! We’ll head down there again and again to run around defeating Gimmicks and snagging Treasure for the Magic we want! So we’ll do this as many times as it takes. We’ll trick as many Fairies into being eaten by the Thousand Dragon as we need to keep going down there and coming back!! We just have to tell them that this time – yes, this time for sure!! – they’ll finally kill the thing!!”

“＿＿＿＿”

“Oh, and you know what we were just talking about? What we really need to get that giant thing drunk and stop the Trap is the Fairy blood, right? So how about we drain their blood and use the rest of them as Mixing ingredients!? Those things like to run off and are pretty rare, so they might make for a pretty good Experience Point conversation item. Gya ha ha ha ha!!”

Beatrice slowly inhaled and exhaled.

She created a new frame on the image above the table and decided to label it “ringleader”.

And then she made an announcement.

“Is that all you wanted to say?”

“What if it was?”

A great rumbling answered him.

The red Holy Swordswoman had slammed her fist down on the table, scattering the false diagram everywhere.

“Let’s take this outside.”

No one was able to perceive what happened next. Not the silver Pure Knight, not his followers, not the other guests nervously watching on, and not even White Witch Filinion at the same table as Beatrice.

They heard an explosive sound after a short delay and suddenly realized one of the inn’s brick walls had crumbled and the Pure Knight had been thrown out onto the stone-paved road like an artillery shell.

It took a full second before he realized he had been kicked.

“Gh…bah…”

As he rolled along, he slowed himself by digging his silver boots into the stone.

“What do you…think you’re doing, you biiii

“You’re dead meat.”

He had forty Commands for pre-registered Magic. He had more than fifty for the Percentage-type that increased his Parameters. One increased his STR by 200%, one his AGI by 500%, one his LUC by 150%, and many more. His muscles, skeleton, and organs remained human, but his clenched fist could slay a tiger and he could singlehandedly defeat a mid-sized Chimera if he used his Shining Weapon.

“You’ve pulled the trigger of your own suicide… Our Magic is meant for exploring the Labyrinth, but you were the one that turned it against your fellow man first, bitch. No complaining now if I slaughter you with the same Magic. You’ve thrown your life away just like those Nonhumans you love so much!!”

“Sorry, but those Nonhumans have much more human hearts than the likes of you.”

“People seem to call you ‘Her With the Long Silver Hair’ or ‘The Deadly Dancer’, but I know the truth.”

“I’m not too fond of those nicknames because they all reference my sex or my body. People are free to call me whatever they want, but I think the only good one in the bunch is ‘The Seven Flames’.”

“I know you’re an obsessive monomaniac that only uses flame Magic!! Don’t you know anything about Elements and Affinity!? I can use my water and earth magic with impunity and turn you to sand whenever I want!!”

The sharp spikes covering the Pure Knight’s Shining Weapon gave a roar.

Each glowing Icon on the reverse side of the shield was one of his weapons. It was a collection of the ultimate Magic used to sweep aside the many Gimmicks encountered in the Labyrinth. One would smash the bedrock with a lightning strike, one would attack with a spear of ice, one would corrode everything with a black mist, and one would gradually petrify its target’s entire body.

“Don’t screw with me! I’m at Lv. 99! I’m at the level cap! All my stats are filled with nines!! Our amount of Magic is equal to our Level, so I’ve got 99 pieces of equipment and incantations stocked up! So show some respect! Bow before me!! Who do you think it is that’s been protecting you here!?”

"…"

"Cry and beg for forgiveness, you perverted bitch. I'll slowly petrify your arms and legs and then smash them before your eyes!! Then I'll crush your look of crazed despair underfoot and ****** your ****!!!!!"

"Right back at you."

Beatrice drew her Shining Weapon from the sheath at her waist.

It was a strange weapon that looked like a thin rapier with the tip removed.

The instant she activated it, the world was dyed orange.

"…Huh?"

The man did not know what that meant.

He could not even react.

The inn town's stone pavement and brick buildings had been replaced by something else entirely. Everything was enveloped in orange. It almost looked like a strange colosseum had appeared around Beatrice and the Pure Knight in all 360 degrees.

But this was not a colosseum.

It was seven tree diagrams. Each of them was a collection of Icons that indicated all sorts of Magic and they were Beatrice's weapons. How many types of Magic surrounded them in all? One thousand? Or did it surpass even ten thousand? The Pure Knight could not even count them all.

"Y-you've…got to be kidding me…"

"Why?"

"Y-you…but you…!? You're only supposed to be able to use fire Magic! Was that all bullshit!?"

"No."

The seven tree diagrams surrounded the entire scenery like an oblong eyeball.

Beatrice chose something as if turning a dial and lining up a cursor.

"It's just that I have collected around fourteen thousand options from fire

Magic alone. Although even that is far from complete.”

“……
……”

He was entirely speechless now.

That Pure Knight had a stock of 99, but when the Percentage-types such as his armor and helmet were omitted, that left only forty or fifty of the Command-type Magic. He had thought that was enough to master the Magic of every Element, so he was completely overwhelmed.

Then he secretly activated some scanning Magic to get some information on Beatrice. One’s Percentage-type Magic came from the clothing they wore, so he was using her appearance to estimate her strength at full power.

The result he got was frightening indeed:

“h3nganphin1hfufvpikih6tsu6nrudfkgur8j”

“What!? It’s completely corrupted!?”

“It probably looks that way because you are still stuck in the realm of two decimal digits. ‘We’ can read it like normal.”

She sounded truly exasperated.

She gave the same sigh as a chess master faced with an amateur who did not even know how to move the pieces.

“Just so you know, this industry only truly begins *after* you reach Lv. 99.”

She demonstrated just how out of his league he was, but she still showed no mercy.

Like a great serpent swallowing a frog, the Holy Swordswoman did not hesitate to activate her Magic.

“Do not underestimate those of us at the level cap, newcomer.”

The outcome could not have been more obvious, but the battle mercilessly began all the same.

Part 8

When Meridiana arrived where her fellow Fairies were gathered, those palm-sized creatures were already setting things up. Everyone was there, even Juliet, Gretel, and her little sister Alice.

The stench was great enough to sting her eyes as well as her nose.

It came from a small container that at human size would have resembled a coffee milk pot.

A sticky liquid filled the tiny pot.

Fairies excelled at Mixing, but this was clearly different.

“I just have to drink all of this, right?”

“Yes. But…”

“I understand. The red pigment in my blood might not be enough to slay that foul dragon, so the humans provided this ‘insurance’.”

She was to fill her stomach with poison and then offer herself up to destroy the foul dragon lord from within.

“…”

Elder Morgan noticed the stiffness of Meridiana’s smile as she spoke so calmly.

She noticed, but it was too late to turn back now.

If Meridiana was stopped, then who would fill that role in her place? And if no one did, would the foul dragon continue consuming the Fairies forevermore? What was right and what was wrong? What would reduce the number of sacrifices and what would increase it? Morgan no longer knew.

So things continued.

Meridiana picked up the pot that a small Fairy had to hold in both arms and she sipped at the contents, but she began violently choking after only the first gulp.

“Cough!! Cough cough!? Ghah!!”

She doubled over and covered her mouth with a hand, but it was not spit, phlegm, or vomit she coughed up. The liquid was already dark red.

Fairies contained a pigment that could intoxicate even a giant Dragon, but that did not mean they were immune to all toxins. Just as a puffer fish would die if it was given aconite, they would suffer and writhe in pain like normal.

Meridiana’s limbs shook and tears filled her eyes, but she still worked at consuming the deadly poison.

By the time the container was half empty, she no longer had the strength to remain standing. She fell to the side and was half-crushed by her own wings as her entire body convulsed.

What would Morgan have done had Meridiana said she could not continue?

But the small Fairy did continue even while collapsed on the ground.

Her eyes were entirely unfocused as they desperately tried to view the companions so nearby.

“Cough, cough… P-please help me… I’m sorry…but I can’t do it on my own…”

“…”

“Don’t stop…even if I cry or wail… Get every last drop inside me. That’s the only way I can protect all of you…”

That built up their resolve.

They all became accomplices.

They used small spoons and ladles to scoop up the sticky liquid. Some held down Meridiana’s arms and legs, one held her nose, and several spoons and ladles poured their contents into her mouth. The Fairy’s body thrashed about with unbelievable strength and threw her companions off time and again. Even so, more hands held her down until the pot was entirely empty.

Tears spilled from every eye, but not one of them suggested they stop.

“…Ah…kah…”

Meridiana lay limply on the ground with her eyes entirely unfocused.

Elder Morgan looked down at the girl, bit her lip, and spoke to the others.

“We need to make the final preparations. Once we carry her to that foul dragon’s feeding ground, this will all be over.”

Part 9

No one in the inn town would be any help.

Even if they knew the Pure Knight and his ilk were monsters, they had no way

of getting through Cave 25's Trap besides deceiving the Fairies, so they were setting the Pure Knight up as the villain and continuing on without dirtying their own hands. That was likely how they viewed this.

Beatrice did not even try to deal with them.

The Break News were said to paradoxically have a soul and humans were no match for them even in a group, so what could they hope to do against that thousand meter Thousand Dragon? She did not know, but she could not just come to a stop. She had no set destination, but she called up a map using Magic and walked randomly around.

How long would it take to convince the Fairies?

Could she save them before they were eaten?

Could she escape the Thousand Dragon pursuing the Fairies?

She had a number of tasks, each more unrealistic than the last. She had no idea what to do about even the very first step: finding the village of the Fairies who hated to be seen.

(But I can't just ignore this.)

Nothing was at stake for her and she did not actually know the Fairies, but was it so wrong to stand up for them? Wasn't this just too much? Only the humans gained anything by getting through Cave 25. It had nothing to do with the Nonhumans that lived happily in Grandnir. Yet that was the goal of deceiving the Fairies by using their desire to save their fellow Fairies and convincing them to let the Thousand Dragon eat them. Was it that strange to find that unacceptable?

——*Why do you go to the Labyrinth?*

Boo Boo's simple question rose in the back of her mind.

At the very least, it was not to grin as she allowed tragedies like this.

The Nonhumans made reverent statues of humans. They thought the humans went to the Labyrinth to prevent disaster from spewing from that hole in the ground. They viewed them as messengers from heaven who had suddenly appeared in Grandnir one day.

That was completely wrong. Humans were ugly. They were so ugly they would

deceive and devour others for their own benefit.

But surely there could be one human who would make that foolish dream come true.

(I can't just ignore this, dammit!!)

"Hm?"

Someone spoke to her from the forest.

"What is it, Beatrice? You only just left a while ago. Did you forget something?"

"Boo Boo."

Then Beatrice remembered something.

So she would not forget that flash of insight in one corner of her mind, she quickly used her fire illusion Magic and recorded the information using red lines and square frames.

(There was a Fairy Ring in Boo Boo's house. That means a Fairy lives there. I might be able to get information on the Fairy village from them!!)

She connected Boo Boo's leaf house with the formless Fairy and drew another red line out from there. She wrote a question mark there to represent their village. If she could complete that connection and convince them, she could get information on the individual Fairy trying to sacrifice herself to the Thousand Dragon. She could save them!!

"Listen, Boo Boo! I need your help!!"

"Okay. I'll do anything if it would help you."

She was glad to hear it.

She told him everything she had learned, although she of course omitted the sickening part about the Pure Knight.

Not that any part of this was not sickening.

As he listened, Boo Boo's porcine face grew visibly distorted.

"That has to be a lie. Not even humans would do that. I mean, humans are the

messengers from heaven who go to the Labyrinth for everyone's sake and prevent disaster from bursting out of that hole in the ground."

"…"

"Besides, the Thousand Dragon is gigantic. Tiny Fairies aren't going to fill it up, so it wouldn't try to eat them."

"This isn't about food, Boo Boo. *It's like dried grass and rock candy*. Not that you would know what I mean by that. Anyway, it's more like an indulgence, so even a little bit is enough."

Beatrice shook her head with a pained look and Boo Boo's face grew even darker.

"It kills for more than what it needs to live? That's unforgivable."

"That's right, Boo Boo. And we humans are trying to use that fact to get the Thousand Dragon drunk. We're trying to make it happy enough that we can get through Cave 25. The humans are using the Thousand Dragon and the Thousand Dragon will allow us through. That way we both benefit. It's coexistence in the worst possible way."

"But the Fairies aren't stupid. They're way smarter than me. They would never believe that."

"The Fairies are tired of being eaten by this predator, so they're willing to agree to even this suspicious idea. Even if it doesn't work, they'll keep going on the assurance that next time it will work. They believe the pigment in Fairy blood will eventually finish off the Thousand Dragon. They'll believe their fallen comrades did not die in vain…no, they won't want to accept it, so they'll avoid looking at reality."

"…"

"I'm sorry, Boo Boo. This isn't an easy topic. I'm really sorry."

"You don't need to apologize." He shook his head. "But I don't know if you can find the Fairies. I've never seen one."

"Can you at least take me to your house? We can start there."

But the house had changed once they arrived.

It looked the same, but it lacked a certain warmth, just like the difference in the air between an occupied house and an abandoned one.

After checking around, Beatrice finally caught on.

“The Fairy Ring is gone…”

There had been a ten centimeter circle in the leaf floor that designated the territory of a Fairy, but it was completely gone. The surface had been torn away and a new leaf set down in its place.

It was clearly artificial.

“If it erased the Fairy Ring, has the Fairy left?”

A bad feeling rapidly spread through Beatrice.

She had no real proof. A lot of different Fairies lived in Grandnir, and there was no proof that the Fairy that lived here was the one.

But it was the first possibility that came to mind.

That changed the diagram of red lines and boxes. It simplified it.

“No, wait… Does that mean the one that lived here was the one!?”

“…”

Boo Boo remained silent for a while.

He looked around his leaf house again. He placed a hand on the walls and column. The leaf walls and the knotted ropes had been repaired with small bits of mud. Each fix was small but thorough and it was clear whoever had done it cared a lot for Boo Boo’s house.

Finally, Boo Boo raised his head.

“I don’t know where the Fairy village is.”

“?”

“But I do know where the Thousand Dragon’s feeding ground is. It lands in the western sea and eats whatever’s on the cliff. It didn’t work, but I think some people even created an altar to get on its good side.”

“Wait, Boo Boo…” muttered Beatrice. “Don’t tell me you’re planning to attack

it directly. That's completely reckless! I agree we need to stop the deceived Fairy, but that doesn't mean directly facing that paradox!!"

But Boo Boo did not listen.

"I can't say anything about that."

He was not talking about human society, the relationship between Experience Points and learning Magic, the benefits of exploring the Labyrinth, the trick to Cave 25, the strength of the Thousand Dragon, its indifference as long as it was given Fairies, or the Fairies who would keep going even as they were deceived.

Boo Boo forced out a low but clear voice and made an announcement.

"I just don't understand why anyone would like doing something like this."

Part 10

Her consciousness had been flashing in and out for a while now, she could not tell up from down, and she had no idea where she was.

Meridiana could at least guess she was near the ocean thanks to the smell of the sea breeze.

This was the Thousand Dragon's feeding ground.

It was the remnants of an altar some reckless person had made in an attempt to contact the great Dragon.

"Gasp…gasp…"

Abandoned there, Meridiana could barely breathe. The inside of her throat was swollen too much for air to pass through and her organs were not functioning properly. That was hardly surprising given the amount of poison that had been forced inside her.

But it would all end here.

No one else would need to be eaten, no one else would need to be afraid, and

no one else would need to be chosen.

The roar of parting water sounded so very far away in her current state. She could not even look over in that direction. Her limbs convulsed irregularly and would not move when she told them to. She could barely think, but that at least kept the fear from gripping her too much.

Then an intense bestial odor reached her.

It was approaching.

The giant dragon's head approached the altar as if to inspect its prize.

It would swallow the small Fairy whole and it would crush the stone altar in its jaws.

(Oh…)

She wished she had thanked Elder Morgan more.

She wished she had taken her little sister Alice on more flying practice.

She wished she had taught Boo Boo how to repair his house.

Those were the only thoughts in her fading mind. There was not a single feeling of rejection such as a fear of death or desire to be saved.

This was for the best.

With that in mind, Meridiana began to close her eyes.

But just before she could, another large form delivered a mighty blow to the side of the Thousand Dragon's maddening head. The thousand meter Break News was knocked aside.

"Huh…?"

Meridiana thought she had to be dreaming or hallucinating.

After all, this was not possible.

No one would come to save her. No one could defeat the Thousand Dragon. That was why it was only natural for her to throw away her own life. There was simply no other option.

But all of those assumptions were overturned in an instant.

The figure was even larger than a Great Rocky Mountain King Bear. Plenty of fat covered powerful muscles, it held an especially large Shining Weapon that resembled a steel beam or a log, and it stood in front of the altar as if to protect the Fairy being sacrificed there.

That mountain gave a roar.

Violent killer intent was directed straight toward him by that foul dragon.

But his back did not budge. Instead, the Shining Weapon spun around and its flat tip pointed right back at the dragon who had known this was a farce but accepted the humans' invitation to indulge in pleasure.

"Are you angry?"

He spoke in a deep, furious voice that scorched the nerves of anyone who heard it.

"But unfortunately, I'm even angrier."

The Fairy knew this had to be a lovely hallucination brought on by her poison-addled mind.

And within that dream, the Fairy recalled something.

This Iberian Orc had abnormal size and strength, but he also had a number of nicknames: the Pathmaker, Lord of the Treacherous Peak, and the Great Glutton. Most of those were baseless names given to him due to his appearance, but there was one of more unknown origins.

Someone had once called him the Dragon Eater.

Part 11

Again and again, deafening collisions of steel and muscle burst out. Each time, an explosion of sparks flew out, a shockwave scattered, and Beatrice had to hold down her long silver hair as she watched from the side.

“Wow…”

Even if he had a Shining Weapon, Boo Boo could not use Magic. That was not an issue of learning it. Nonhumans had inborn Skills, but could not learn Magic. Learning Magic by earning Experience Points was only possible for those who had come from another world, so the Shining Weapon was only an incredibly strong and unbreakable club for Boo Boo.

And yet as he ran freely about, he used only that weapon to face the thousand-meter Dragon. It was less like a one-on-one duel and more like a giant pushing at a mountain. But instead of being the tomfoolery of a jester, he was pulling it off. He knocked back the great head that tried to bite through everything, he pushed back the body that tried to crush everything from above, and he broke through or sidestepped the great wind of the flapping wings and the torrent of ultra-pressurized water spewing from its mouth.

Given their difference in size, Boo Boo’s attacks should have been like hitting a human with a toothpick, but his great strength and speed pushed that abnormal monster back like it was being struck by a hail of gunfire.

Also, Boo Boo was not fighting from the land next to the ocean.

He was using his opponent’s field.

He was using the ocean as his footing.

“I can’t believe this… He isn’t relying on Magic or Skills… Is this simple physics like a rock skipping across the water!?”

It sounded like a joke to ask how far skipping a rock could be scaled up.

But if a sports car was driven horizontally onto a river at 200 kph, it would skip two or three times.

Boo Boo was doing the same.

His speed and leg strength were so great that he could use the water as his footing. He leaped about on the empty water, landed on the spikes or stones sticking out of the water, occasionally landed on the giant Thousand Dragon itself, and then used his massive leg strength to create the kinetic energy needed to leap across the water once more.

It was not Magic.

He was not using a Skill.

He had simply trained his body to the point that he had the strength for this miraculous result. His physical strength was enough to challenge the Thousand Dragon on his own, something not even Beatrice and her fourteen thousand types of Magic could do.

The great dragon's fangs broke, its claws were torn away, and its roars became screams. The legs and wings used to kill were now used to protect itself and then to flee. When it tried to fly away, Boo Boo dropped down on it like a shooting star and mercilessly swung down the Shining Weapon in his hands.

He pinned the Thousand Dragon to the ocean as if driving a massive stake into the world.

"Kh!!"

To protect the Fairy from the massive wall of water, Beatrice activated her rapier-like Shining Weapon and created a defensive wall of flames.

But that was all.

That was the only Magic she used when faced with the Break News paradoxically said to have a soul.

Boo Boo dealt with it all singlehandedly.

With no help from Beatrice, he used the blunt tip of his Shining Weapon to stab deep into the Thousand Dragon's head.

Time stopped.

All sound vanished.

As Boo Boo stood on top of the great dragon's head in the ocean, he spoke in an extremely deep voice as he adjusted his hold on the grip of the Shining Weapon stabbed vertically down.

"I'll be watching you."

The great dragon squirmed like a frightened child.

The Shining Weapon had reached its skull.

Boo Boo held the weapon at the line just before cracking open that skull.

“You can’t avoid killing to live, but if you kill for any other reason, I’ll do the same to you. Got that?”

That was all.

The monster gave in to mere words.

Part 12

A drumbeat arrived from the distance.

The inn town was holding a festival. After the retreat of the Thousand Dragon that provide the occult power source of Cave 25, the Trap blocking their way had ceased to function. They were likely celebrating that.

But the festival was not celebrating anyone in particular.

Boo Boo was watching the lights from a small hill located far away.

“What is it, Boo Boo? Don’t you want to check out the festival?”

When Beatrice arrived, she asked him that and he answered without looking back her way.

“I’m fine being alone.”

“?”

“I would only scare everyone, so I can’t go to the festival. In that case, I’d rather be alone.”

His back looked somehow small.

“It cried…”

“?”

“The Thousand Dragon cried and begged me to stop. But all I could do was hit it. That was the only way to save the Fairy.”

“Boo Boo…”

“I think I’m the biggest monster of all.”

His shoulders drooped and he looked on the verge of tears.

“It scares me. It scares me that this is all I can do. And it scares me that I might decide it was the right thing to do since it worked. It really scares me that I’ll more readily raise my Shining Weapon next time. It really, really scares me that I could become someone that kills for more than to live and eat.”

Beatrice narrowed her eyes at that.

Boo Boo looked so very different from when they had played together long ago. His stuffed animal body had swelled out to the point she had to look up at him. He reeked and he could easily crush her just by tossing and turning in his sleep. She doubted all of her fourteen thousand types of Magic would be enough to defeat him and he had won out against a Break News just by swinging around his Shining Weapon with pure brute strength.

But deep down, he had not changed from that small Orc that watched the festival from a distance because he did not want to scare everyone.

Knowing that was enough.

“Don’t be silly, Boo Boo.”

Beatrice stood next to Boo Boo who was taller than her even when he sat down and she leaned against him.

“I won’t let that happen. We’re friends after all.”

Part 13

And another individual watched those two from a short distance behind them.

She was a fifteen centimeter Fairy.

The poison had finally left her, so Meridiana was flying through the air once

more.

“Boo Boo…”

Even if one did not seem to change and even if they did not wish to change, they still changed bit by bit.

And it was all so he who wished to be alone would no longer be viewed as a monster.

Chapter 2: Magic Processing and Paradigm Shift

Part 1

“Phew…”

A girl with her hair tied in twintails using her own hair breathed a quiet sigh inside a large garden located in a clearing surrounded by verdant trees. Particles of light danced around her shoulders, but they scattered as she walked.

She walked to one corner of a marble gazebo.

However, it did not contain the chairs or table needed to hold a tea party. It contained a large round jacuzzi. The girl with long black twintails let her exhausted body sink into the open air bath kept at a comfortable temperature 24 hours a day. She practically collapsed into it without removing the red dress which had a large slit up it.

After a short delay, a small maid approached with light footsteps. The short black hair and the hat rather than a headdress meant this was the youngest of the three sisters. They could be classified as “large”, “medium”, and “small”, so it was easy to tell which one it was from a distance.

“You’re back, milady? …Waaah!? You jumped into the bath in your dress again? But that’s a top class Robe Decollete! It’s 100% silk, made by a craftsman with a royal warrant, and known as a ‘wearable mansion’!!”

“Didn’t I tell you I don’t need anyone greeting me since I didn’t know when I would be back? …And exploring another world is exhausting. I keep telling you I want to pass through the door in only a bathrobe so I can take a bath the second I get back. This thing is surprisingly hard to take off, you know?”

“We can’t let you do something so embarrassing!”

“My equipment changes when I’m in Ground’s Nir anyway. In fact, the clothing and armor is really just Magic. If only I could bring this jacuzzi with me.”

“Anyway, um, well, anyway, I can only insist that you be more careful next time!!”

The small maid was promptly preparing some iced tea, but (as always) the girl was not listening.

As she floated face up on the warm water's surface, her red dress spread wide around her.

The outfit looked like it belonged on the star of a ball or at a mistaken sort of wedding. Her hair was a lustrous black and she always made sure to tell the adults around her that she preferred wearing a kimono, but they must have been feigning indifference because they refused to listen and continued using her as a dress-up doll.

"How was Ground's Nir, milady?"

The maid asked a cheerful question while shaking the red ribbon decorating her modest chest. The girl pulled out her smartphone and sent over some data while floating in the bath.

"Here's a souvenir. We've opened the path to oil-producing corn that will prevent desertification while also solving the energy crisis. You can use that Piece however you like."

"Waaah!? Th-th-that-that data could easily change the history of mankind, so why do you always toss it around like it's a game of catch!?"

The dress girl floating in the warm water smiled at the maid who was flailing her arms around.

"My stance hasn't changed. Then again, some things might head in a different direction now that the way through Cave 25 has opened. Still…hm, I guess there's no point in telling you about that. Anyway, Haruka, are you using the Hourglass like you're supposed to?"

"Ah, oops. I almost forgot!"

The girl gestured over and the maid quickly began operating the device.

It was called an Hourglass, but it was not actually one. She opened the stopwatch app on the smartphone sitting on the table and a two minute countdown started.

The girl operated her own smartphone while her floating dress and twintails

swayed in water. It was of course waterproof. When she activated the AR mode, she could look through the screen to see dots of light covering the scenery and lines of light connecting them.

“B-12, G-29, and Y-03. The world still hasn’t seen any of them.”

“Do most of them not know about the future technology you can see, milady?”

“I have to guide them elsewhere before they see that path. Using V-71 and P-01 would probably be best.”

The maid remained carefree because she was not even thinking about catching up to what the sharp-eyed dress girl was thinking.

“Ground’s Nir’s Magic certainly has its plusses and its minuses. It can easily pull off precision processing that not even laser processing can match.”

Magic could only be used in Ground’s Nir and nothing in this world could be brought to Ground’s Nir.

The only things they could bring back were the Pieces created from data stored in their Shining Weapons.

“Thanks to that, we can easily bend this world. ..It really is like pouring orange juice, citrus soda, milk, and chocolate into apple juice and calling it a mixed drink.”

A single breakthrough could create an abnormally powerful supercomputer.

That supercomputer could create compatible workstations, those workstations could control compatible PCs, and those would then lead to compatible mobile devices.

And this was not limited to a single field.

It could be processors, cars, homes, airplanes, ships, health, communications, sports, optical devices, food processing, satellites, robotics, agriculture, printed circuit boards…and even military technology.

And those could easily change the world.

It went beyond the inevitable decay of the prosperous. Even a small technological revolution could entirely change the balance of power, so letting

your guard down even for a moment could send yesterday's winner tumbling down to be tomorrow's loser. The world's most powerful army could be left in the dust while some strange mercenary group or ideological organization could suddenly rise to the top.

Technological breakthroughs were made by a single puzzle "Piece".

That was why every country's government and corporations desperately sought those Pieces. They thoroughly searched through the jumbled assortment of them registered online, hoping to find one they could use in their research. If they found one that fit and that resolved their personal problem, they could complete the new technology or new manufacturing method that would change the world. For a brief time, the throne would be theirs.

As the people exploring Ground's Nir brought back and uploaded their Pieces, they had no idea who would end up with it and what kind of research it would become. And they did not care. They were only greedily seeking Experience Points to learn Magic.

They brought back the various Pieces and uploaded them because they might as well. If that did lead to some great research breakthrough, they would receive an extremely lucrative contract payment from the nation or corporation in question. It was something like a risky lottery in which one guessed what would be useful rather than leaving it all up to luck.

And that could lead to moral hazards like with the Fairies and the Thousand Dragon.

Immoral people were beginning to appear in this world as well. They declared themselves the winners as they created a somewhat twisted world.

"I need to be careful."

Thanks to the water, the red dress's fabric clung to the girl's skin and her long twintails floated around her.

The corn data she had tossed to the maid was a Piece with a complete simulation, telling them which direction it would take them. If that corn was planted in the desert, there was no chance of it leading to an outbreak of bugs or a sandstorm assaulting a city.

But what else would happen?

When the existence of Ground's Nir had first been revealed, mankind had had difficulty with the Labyrinth. That had lasted until a free paper was published on a message board, suggesting the Shining Weapons at the core of a Magic system modeled after video games, the best system for modern human use.

That had been the world's very first Piece.

The unknown author of that paper (who might have been an individual or a group) was known as the Sage, but were they correct in saying that simply gathering the Pieces was the right thing to do? Was it right to go along with the Sage's idea when they almost seemed to be enjoying the show as the world grew so twisted and no one gave any thought to correcting it?

"We don't know what the Pieces we collect will lead to, but that's just abandoning any responsibility. If we're going to collect these Pieces, we need to know how they'll change the world."

"Milady…"

The dress girl operated her smartphone while listening to the maid. She canceled AR mode and played a normal full-seg broadcast on a normal screen.

B-12, G-29, and Y-03 had to be stopped.

V-71 and P-01 would be useful in avoiding them.

Among the endless number of new technologies to be created from the countless Pieces, the dress girl was focused on a certain industry in particular.

"As the West complains more and more about obesity, obesity, obesity, they've started focusing on Japan's fish culture. You don't have to suffer through an oppressively healthy diet and you can eat as much delicious food as you want, all while losing weight! Our Fishing Cafeteria Group is finally heading overseas!"

"The next global standard in fast food is Chinese food! Ramen, fried rice, and gyoza are already part of the world's vocabulary, so all that remains is for us to set the standard. The FE Caiguan Zhushi Gongsi is beginning a simultaneous campaign in fifty countries around the world."

"Burgers are old news? Well, we're going to tear down that 'old news' and

bring you a brand new experience based on the lessons we've learned in the past. This is a giant step forward and a challenge to our rivals. No one can ransack our field."

(The fast food industry is fighting for global dominance. They want to cover the entire planet, national borders be damned, and they want to serve as many grams as possible for as little money as possible.)

The girl sighed as if to force out the unpleasant feeling growing deep in her chest.

Boo Boo really seemed to believe humans were messengers from heaven, but the reality was very different. She silently swore to never let him see this ugly side of humanity.

Then she raised her head and spoke.

"Haruka."

"Y-yes!? What is it, milady!?"

"I know you set up the Hourglass, but you didn't mute the smartphone, did you?"

"Waaah!!"

The maid panicked and caused the tea set on the table to clank together, but the red dress girl ignored her and shut off the image on her smartphone's screen.

She removed the hard key inserted into the bottom connector and connected it to something hanging from her neck by a thin necklace chain.

The device dancing in front of her chest was smaller and skinnier than a USB flash drive.

The Nonhumans of Ground's Nir would probably think it looked like a tiny version of the sword or spear Shining Weapons that humans used.

She used her thumb to close up the connector on the blade.

(Honestly, I understand changing our appearance, but it also partially overwrites your speech patterns, personality, and thought patterns to make

room for the magic you've learned. It really makes you think.)

Even so, the girl was not going to stop what she was doing.

She did not simply want to be some corporation's tool.

She had another reason to continue her exploration of Ground's Nir.

"I've got to do something."

She operated something with the movement of her eyes.

The roof of the gazebo became transparent and she could see a long contrail in the clear blue afternoon sky.

When she looked further into the distance, she saw high-rise buildings beyond the green trees.

Yes.

This was a one kilometer wide circle cleared out in the center of Tokyo's Roppongi.

It was known as the Detached Magic Palace. That green garden "prison" had been constructed for the girl known as a Holy Swordswoman.

Part 2

"I made a garden."

"Kyah! That's amazing, Boo Boo. You're so civilized!"

"Do you hate me, Beatrice?"

"Don't be silly. Anyway, what are you growing?"

Boo Boo had indeed forcibly tilled the hard earth near the Fairy-protected leaf house. It must have been some extremely fast-growing vegetable because green ivy was already climbing up the supports and bearing green vegetables. They looked like tomatoes, but Beatrice could not tell if they were supposed to be

green or if they would grow red later.

“Boo Boo, what kind of vegetable is this?”

“They’re called Flat Chest Eggplants.”

“Flat Chest…?”

That name included an unacceptable term for a teenage girl, but Beatrice decided to assume that was a Nonhuman term that just so happened to sound like that in human language.

However…

“If you eat it, it’s supposed to make your chest flat. But it doesn’t make me any slimmer when I eat it, so no one knows if it’s true or not.”

“It *does* mean that!!!???”

Beatrice backed away from that enemy of girls everywhere and used her gauntleted hands to guard her chest.

Oblivious to the girl’s terror, Boo Boo tilted his head and said more.

“Huh? Or was it touching the Flat Chest Eggplant that mattered? No, it was touching it and then touching your chest, getting the juice on you. …Or was it something else? Hmm, I’m not an old witch, so I don’t remember that tricky stuff.”

“Waaah!! Tell me that before I protect myself with the finger I used to poke the vegetable, Boo Boo!!”

Beatrice tearfully shouted with pretty much all of her strength and quickly used fire illusion Magic to call up a rectangular frame. She rapidly scrolled through the specs listed there and stopped on a certain point.

It had gone down.

It had gone down a little.

It was only a few millimeters, but she had lost the critical amount she needed to be above rather than below average.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“Wh-what is it, Beatrice!?”

“Wh-wh-what do I do, what do I do, what do I do!? If I head back and come back to Ground’s Nir, will my appearance reset? And if that doesn’t work, do I need to ask White Witch Filinion for help? Ask *her*!? Ask that cow in glasses for help with my breasts!?”

The Holy Swordswoman shouted and tore at her beautiful hair with both hands.

She was afraid to think what would happen if her amateur methods did not work. Crying to that cow about this would be a suicidal declaration of defeat. But just in case (Yes, just in case!), she created a frame using the two L-shapes of her thumb and forefinger and took a Magic photo of the vegetable.

But…

“P-pant, pant, pant. B-but, Boo Boo.”

“What is all this about, Beatrice?”

“Your garden’s vegetables aren’t doing too good. There are bugs on them and is this from birds pecking at them?”

“That’s part of nature, so there’s no helping it.”

“But this doesn’t leave any for you.”

“The bugs eat the vegetables I make, the birds eat the bugs, the beasts eat the birds, and I catch the beasts, so it’s still a good deal for me.”

She tried using her illusion Magic to create a chart out of red lines and frames, but…

“Hmm… Will it really work out that way? I think you’re losing too much to luck.”

“My logic is perfect, so it’s fine.”

“Also, vegetables aren’t there to bring in meat. You need to eat the vegetables too. Everything needs to be balanced.”

“Vegetables… Why would you want me to do something I hate? Maybe you do hate me…”

Beatrice nearly asked why he had made the garden in the first place, but she wanted to avoid a pointless argument like that.

“By the way, Boo Boo. I wanted to ask you something.”

“G-gulp!? I-I’m eating my Nyandetta Fruit! I’m not secretly hiding them!!”

“…Boo Boo?”

What even was a Nyandetta Fruit?

“Vegetables are important, but let’s talk about something else. Boo Boo, have you heard of a Guild known as Elkiad?”

“I’ve never heard of a vegetable called that.”

“I see. So you really don’t know anything.”

Boo Boo had no connection with human society, so he might not even know what a Guild is, much less a specific one like Elkiad.

Beatrice prepared a few red lines and frames and showed them to Boo Boo.

“A Guild is a human organization created to explore the Labyrinth. You can think of them as a gathering of several Parties, groups that actually head out the Labyrinth. But a Guild will include noncombat logistical support members who prepare food and other things needed for everyday life.”

“I don’t like thinking about all that tricky stuff.”

“Oh, but it’s simple, Boo Boo. If you hear the name Elkiad, then avoid them if at all possible. They’re a dangerous Guild that’s been gaining power recently and they’re creating a real moral hazard among their ranks. They’re people whose words I can understand but whose thoughts I can’t. So be careful.”

She created a frame labeled Elkiad and drew an X over it without any connecting red lines.

Simply put, the humans behind the Fairy and Thousand Dragon incident had belonged to Elkiad.

If the lowest members were like that, then the central members had to be even more *rotten*.

She left that unsaid because she did not want to remind kind Boo Boo of that

unpleasant business, but she did make one thing quite clear.

“Elkiad seems to be growing impatient with their Labyrinth exploration. The wiring in their head was messed up to begin with, but that impatience is pushing them even further. Avoiding them is in your best interest.”

“Is this about Magic and Experience Points?”

“That’s right, Boo Boo. Good job remembering that.”

“I don’t really get it. Is shooting fire or ice from your hand really that great? I mean, it is pretty cool, but is it worth risking your life in that scary Labyrinth?”

“Heh heh heh. Yes, you might be right about that. It probably isn’t a testament to human intelligence that we see excess value in that. We’re just a bunch of fools that are really good at finding more than is absolutely necessary.”

“But I would like to be able to fly.”

“Yes. And I’d like to make a candy house.”

Part 3

After parting ways with Boo Boo, Beatrice opened her Magic map and walked toward the inn town. The inn town was the human base of operations, but it had no homes. None of the shop owners slept in Ground’s Nir. They would look after the shop in rotations of two or three shifts, so no single person stayed in Ground’s Nir for long. For better or for worse, Ground’s Nir’s Nonhumans were not affected much by human culture.

Even so, Beatrice ran across two familiar faces in the inn town. One was the White Witch Filinion with her fluffy blonde hair, glasses, white cloak, dress, and low-rise shorts. As always, she was showing off her breasts that Beatrice could only call “gluttonous”, but Beatrice was smugly certain that her type was much less impressive back in their original world.

The other was Fighter Priest Armelina who had short green hair, a tall stature,

and a very, very flat (ha ha) chest. She wore a long green skirt with a long slit on both sides. The boldly exposed chest seemed odd for a supposed priest, but that was actually fairly tame for Ground's Nir.

The two of them were speaking in front of an open-air shop with fruit juice in hand. But instead of an elegant chat over tea, they seemed to be plotting some way to get Mixing ingredients and the gears used as currency.

Then again, those two were only ever talking about the Labyrinth or Magic, which really came down to money in the end.

"Oh, Beatrice."

"We were just talking about you."

"?"

She joined the conversation and they both started talking to her.

"With the route through Cave 25 opened, things have gotten pretty busy around here."

"But can we really let that Piece be uploaded to our world? I don't know much about big data or the conspiracies of global corporations, but this one's a little too blatant. And of course, that brings us to you."

"I suppose it would," casually agreed Beatrice. "So are you trying to get me to play the villain again?"

"What are you talking about? You're the one that started this."

The White Witch sounded exasperated and Armelina spoke up next to her.

"Do you really think Filinion can play your role when all she can do is heal people and let those giant boobs bounce around?"

"M-my breasts have nothing to do with this! I didn't ask to have them this big!"

"What!? Don't tell me you think they're a negative, you cow!"

"What!? Don't tell me you think they're a negative, you cow!"

Filinion blushed and covered her chest with both hands, but Beatrice and Armelina snapped back at her in perfect unison. The Holy Swordswoman's ahoge

ignited as an illuminating fire.

It was the Fighting Priest who first realized this was not the time for that.

“Anyway, it’s the usual situation, so wouldn’t you be best, Beatrice? And it doesn’t look to me like you’re complaining.”

“That’s fine with me. So does that mean we’re off to the Labyrinth? When do we start?”

“Now, if that’s okay.”

The Holy Swordswoman, White Witch, and Fighting Priest were all monsters at the level cap who claimed things only began after reaching Level 99. Those three girls with tricky Jobs formed a temporary Party.

“I feel like we’re going to get stabbed in the back someday.”

“I’m counting on you to heal me when that day comes. Now let’s go.”

Part 4

Eternal Foods will provide safety and reliability to the world’s food!

Food poisoning, carcinogens, and other health hazards. Not even canning, freezing, drying, and vacuum sealing can wholly eliminate all of these problems, but we have eliminated them all with our thorough control of the original ingredients. The most useful technique is a natural preservative. Chemical preservatives can eliminate most food risks, but too little and you get food poisoning yet two much and you get other health hazards. This has been a real problem, hasn’t it? But Eternal Foods has developed the Imortalise Series. This mixture of natural preservative extracts can successfully reduce the pathogens behind food poisoning by 99.9% while also completely eliminating any dangerous chemical compounds. This is truly a groundbreaking health defense.

Preventing spoilage allows food to be shipped over much larger distances, allowing stores to expand, and the extended shelf life prevents food waste. This

should translate into a positive reduction in price for you, the consumers.

And from a societal standpoint, food can be more easily stockpiled and wasted food more efficiently reused.

Part 5

After ending their Labyrinth exploration for the day and returning aboveground, Beatrice walked along a path while somewhat rearranging the map created from illusion Magic. The automap function was based on where she had walked, so it was a little crude.

(That was an awful trip. We were running for our lives the entire time… All we did was run away from that super-tough punishment Gimmick known as the Fingertip of Destruction.)

She could sync her map with map-obsessed Fighting Priest Armelina later on, but that was not a happy thought since the girl was bound to take a ton of gears as payment.

(I can't forget the basic fact that we were lucky to get back safely at all. There is Magic to return immediately, but then you have to leave behind all of the Treasure you'd gathered. Ahh, I'm so tired.)

For a change of pace, she called up her Magic map of the area and headed to Boo Boo's house, but then she heard a scream beyond the trees.

"Squeal! …O-ow! Y-you're just too strong for me."

"Hm? What is it, Boo Boo!?"

Beatrice could tell this was serious and she rushed over, but she was tilting her head even as she rushed. Boo Boo had unilaterally beaten the thousand meter Break News known as the Thousand Dragon, so was there anything he could not defeat?

Her question was quickly answered.

Right in front of his tent-like leaf house, Boo Boo was collapsed face down as he trembled with his hands over his head.

His butt rose up like a small hill and a girl of about ten with long silver hair and a skimpy black outfit was sitting cross-legged on top of that hill.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!! You may have gotten carried away after beating up the Thousand Dragon, but now do you see how pitiful you truly are, Nonhuman? That thing was only the lowest of the Break News. Now tremble in the face of real power!!”

“I-I never cared about strength.”

“But you do have talent. Why not take me as your master and have me retrain you from the ground up?”

“This old hag isn’t listening to anything I-…ow!!”

Beatrice was unsure how to react.

What was this? Had four meter Boo Boo really gotten into a fight with a ten year old girl and had he really been the one to get beaten up?

(Yeah… I have no idea what’s going on here, but I am glad this didn’t go: ‘You’re my enemy’ → Boo Boo beats the ever-living snot out of a little girl.)

That said, she could not figure this out, so she tried solving it a piece at a time.

So what should she ask first?

“I kind of doubt it, but…Boo Boo, is having a girl sit on you your idea of fun?”

“The only things I do for fun are puzzle rings and the ring toss. Heh heh. I can solve even the trickiest puzzle ring before you can count to three.”

“That’s because you break them, Boo Boo. Now, would you mind explaining who this girl is?”

Beatrice had started with that because of how the girl was dressed. If she was being generous, she would call it a black dress, but it felt more like the girl had a ribbon wrapped around her body and had added a miniskirt on top of that. She also had tropical flower decorations on either side of her head and on her back, but that was not the main point. Beatrice’s armor and skirt were technically

Magic and every piece of equipment increased her strength or thought speed by a certain percentage…but this girl had none of that. Her clothing was most likely special-made from Ground Spider silk, but that meant it was not Magic. These were simply clothes.

And that led to a simple conclusion.

This girl looked just like a human, but she was clearly doing something humans did not.

And as the black ribbon dress girl gave off an aura of cruel delight like an evil demon king sitting in his throne, she stood up on top of Boo Boo's butt, placed her hands on her hips, and looked down at Beatrice.

"Hee hee. I am Sutriona, one of the Break News. I am of course the Queen of the Harlots who appears in the crimson night."

"Bfhh!?"

Beatrice spat out the contents of her mouth at that sudden announcement.

(How can she say that with such a cherubic face!?)

"I had heard he had defeated one of us Break News, even if it was the lowliest one. I was curious, so I challenged to him to a bit of a fight. However, it was not even worth spreading my Wings of the Maddeningly Hot Night."

"No, not that! I don't care about that! What was that about harlots? Is this some elaborate joke!?"

"You care about that? But it's the truth, so I'm not sure what to tell you. I am the queen of the thousands of sweltering nights and the sandstorm of maddening red heat that consumes eons of peace. What other title could I use?"

"I really, really hope this isn't it, but…are you seriously calling yourself that? No one's making you do it after you lost a game or something?"

"I was sick of everyone calling me cute when I was Queen of the Fairies, so I changed the title myself. For some reason, my shrine maidens at the waterfall altar have been sobbing ever since."

"I had a feeling that was it!!"

“What is your problem? No one deserves to be called Queen of the Harlots more than me. For example, I am of course not wearing any panties.”

“G-get down from there!! Stop standing so triumphantly on top of Boo Boo, you old hag!!”

After some struggles and difficulties, Beatrice somehow managed to drag Sutriona, Queen of the Har-…of the Fairies, down from the small hill of Boo Boo’s butt.

But was this slender girl really a Break News just as strong as, or even stronger than, the Thousand Dragon?

How exactly had she knocked Boo Boo down to the dirt?

When Beatrice asked, Sutriona put her hands on her hips, gave a proud snort, and answered.

“How, you ask? With your world’s wrestling techniques.”

“Where did you learn about those!? No, that’s not the point. How could you possibly wrestle with him!? Your arms and legs are too short to deal with Boo Boo’s giant body. You’d never be able to reach for a throw or a joint lock!!”

“Oh? Did you just say ‘short’, human girl?”

The long, silver-haired girl gave a dark smile and an ominous aura surrounded her.

“Skinny, I’ll allow. Small, I’ll put up with. …But you just said ‘short’, didn’t you?”

“Eh? What?”

“If you want to know that badly, I’ll show you just how I brought down that Iberian Orc. I used this fifteen joint lock combo from hellllllllllllllllll!!”

“Eh? Iberian Orc is a real species name!? And wait, you idiot!! Are you saying you pinned Boo Boo down like this without any underwear on!? And this pincer hold-vrrvbrvrchhhhhhhhhh!?”

With an almost silly sound of violence, the Holy Swordswoman who had free use of fourteen thousand types of fire Magic was balled up like something from a

joke.

Three hundred seconds later, Beatrice was face-down on the ground and trembling with her hands over her head. Meanwhile, Sutriona was sitting with her legs crossed on top of Beatrice's butt.

"There. You should have a good idea of just how unbeatable I am now."

"E-even after you used it on me…I still have no idea how you did it…?"

"That weak Thousand Dragon was invading my territory and devouring my Fairies when I was away. I planned to punish that thing eventually, but now I need to thank you for doing it for me. Rejoice in this rare opportunity to spar with someone so far out of your league and try to turn this defeat into valuable experience."

Sutriona was mocking her, but Beatrice's rapier-like Shining Weapon was emitting a flashing sign into the empty air. She drew it from its sheath with her butt still sticking into the air and was shocked to find she had earned quite a few Experience Points. It was actually far more than she would get from a trip to the Labyrinth, but she was afraid what bizarre path she would head down if she got used to earning them like this.

"B-but… We've come a long way if we've survived two encounters with a Break News…"

On top of that, this one spoke the human language and saw the Fairies as her own. That was rare for the Break News who generally followed a random route through the island as they (in a way, selfishly) spread different sorts of chaos. Of course, that did not mean this one had the same morals or standards as humans.

"Oh, it's all connected if you pay attention. Besides, isn't it customary to bring a small gift when moving in?"

"…? I think I just heard something I can't just ignore."

"Weren't you listening?"

Boo Boo sounded fearful, but Sutriona put a hand on her slender waist and ground the finger of the other against her temple while winking.

"Defeating that weak Thousand Dragon created a change in our territories. I

need to rule this area as well now, so I stopped by to say hello."

Boo Boo decided right then and there that he was moving, but the Break News dissuaded him with a wrestling move.

Part 6

Palm-sized Fairy Meridiana repaired the leaf house's roof to keep out the rain as she viewed the hellish scene below.

"Oh, dear. Oh, my. Would you look at that, Boo Boo."

A visit from the Fairy Queen was a rare thing. The Break News generally liked to show off and the humans and Nonhumans would live peaceful lives by steering clear of their path as if they had detected a coming storm. But Sutriona was an exception. She was well-known as a Break News that no one could track. She would appear so unexpectedly that not even the Fairy village could predict it, to say nothing of the humans. Probably only the other Break News could see through her actions.

Thus, the Fairy village had Elder Morgan as a leader in Sutriona's place and Meridiana saw Sutriona as more of a goddess than a queen. Meridiana had been taught Sutriona was always watching over them, but she was not to be mocked even if she did not come to save them. That was the unrealistic sort of higher being Sutriona seemed to be.

But now that godlike Fairy Queen had appeared so easily.

Boo Boo had caught the attention of someone on that level.

"Perhaps I should prepare some Red Rice for tonight. Eh heh heh."

Meridiana flew down from the roof.

But even if Sutriona was playing around, she was still the Fairy Queen and one of the Break News. Boo Boo and Beatrice's bodies would be crying out in agony. With kind thoughts in mind, Meridiana started for the forest to gather the

standard Ground's Nir herbs used in compresses.

She planned to bring them first aid medicine and a small celebratory meal.

The Fairy saw paying back Boo Boo with housework as her meaning in life and she was the type to delight in having lots to do.

"I need to work even harder to make sure Boo Boo can live comfortably."

That evening, Boo Boo grimaced at the sharp smell coming from his house.

"My house smells weird!"

"Your house always smells, Boo Boo. But what is this? It smells like someone soaked a compress in a bucket of water and just left it for three days."

"I feel like you're picking a fight with me, Beatrice."

"You're imagining it. But…what is this here? It's red and sticky… Is it a grain?"

"I promised myself I wouldn't waste food. …Ew!? This rice has the room's smell all over it!"

"Hmm… If I put this in my mouth, I'm pretty sure something unpleasant would reach my nose."

For a while afterwards, Boo Boo lived in fear of the poltergeist threatening his peaceful home.

Part 7

A kilometer wide green circle sat in the center of Roppongi, Tokyo.

It was the Detached Magic Palace.

After passing through a rectangular frame of light, the silver-and red-haired swordswoman in red armor and a miniskirt became a girl with black twintails and a ball dress.

In the garden surrounded by green trees, a round jacuzzi was protected by a gazebo-like roof. When she arrived there, she gave into her exhaustion and threw herself into the hot water without removing her clothing. The long skirt with a large slit up the side spread out along the water's surface. The girl flipped over onto her back and pulled a hard key resembling her Shining Weapon rapier from the bottom connector of her smartphone.

She could feel the exhaustion rising within her, but she could not let the sleepiness get the better of her.

(The battles in the Labyrinth seem to wear out your head more than your body. So let your guard down for a moment and you fall asleep.)

"Phew."

She checked the approximate time on the screen. She had spent about four days and seven hours there this time. The girl had been born in this world and on this planet, so spending too much time in Ground's Nir could mess with her internal clock and cause serious irregularities in her body and mind. This was the main reason that the humans used the inn town as a base but did not have any permanent residences there.

The three maid sisters were not here today.

She floated face-up in the open-air bath and grabbed a pitcher of water from a tray floating with her. She poured the cold water in a cup and gulped it down.

Allotting her earned Experience Points and learning new Magic could wait.

Her smartphone contained a Log of her time spent searching the Labyrinth since it had been saved to her Shining Weapon. When she looked back through it, she could tell the battles with the lifeless Gimmicks were very different from the battles on the surface. They were more like games of red light, green light than games of tag. The Gimmicks only moved when she did, so she had an unlimited amount of time to think up her next move right in front of the enemy. In a Party battle or Guild battle, teamwork became important. Would they all move together as a single group or would individuals stay still to give the attackers and healers more chances to move?

However, even the slightest fidget could be seen as a movement and, when

there were multiple people in a single area, the Gimmick could react to someone else's movement even if you remained entirely still. So if your accidental movement put someone else in danger, it could earn unnecessary resentment.

(Oh, this is just useless… I want to review my mistakes, but my brain doesn't want to do anything…)

She closed the screen but then started fiddling with the smartphone to have something to do. She found a few new articles at the top of a news site.

These were the headlines:

"UN Resolution Fails, Standing Member-Nations Unable to Agree"

"Special Report: Has the Countdown in the Atlantic Really Begun?"

"The Euro Crash. Are Major US Investors Really to Blame?"

"Asia Ignored. Where will the World Police Turn Next?"

"The European Shift to the Far Right Accelerates. Is it a Reaction to Reduced Strength in Exports?"

None of them made her want to tap on the link. Checking the video sites and full-seg mobile TV would likely only show the same sort of news.

"I need to stay focused…"

The twintailed girl spoke quietly to herself as her red dress spread out in the water.

Once she had gotten a light meal and some sleep to readjust her internal clock, she would return to Ground's Nir. There was a Piece the nations and corporations desperately wanted and she could not let them beat her to it after so much work.

A Piece was a factor that could provide a breakthrough to stalled human technology and cause a sudden change to the global civilization. They were created with a processing technique that used Magic.

A Piece was registered by an individual and its rights were bought by an interested corporation or nation. It was not revealed who bought it and the individual simply received the payment. Only then did the Piece lead to actual

production.

The Pieces were useless to the girl and the others in Ground's Nir if they simply held onto them. To a normal person, a physics textbook was only useful for studying, but the knowledge contained inside was used to create rockets that flew into space. This was the same.

Who would acquire them?

Where would they end up?

The girl and the others truly did hold history in their hands. Most people carelessly use their Pieces and carelessly uploaded them. They were blinded by the lucrative contract fees that rivalled a lottery win if a Piece was deemed useful by a nation or corporation (or someone pretending to be one of those), so they did not think it through that far. However, if someone was paying that much, then it was worth that much.

"Honestly…"

The red dress girl looked back down and used the hard key to allot her Experience Points and manage her Magic.

In addition to the ever-changing headlines, the news site had one special article that never moved from the very top as if it had a hall of fame position.

It had the following headline:

"Is an Atlantic Sovereignty War Really Possible? What Would be Gained in a Conflict between an Old Giant and a New Giant?"

Part 8

"The humans are the ones you really need to watch out for, Boo Boo."

Fairy Queen Sutriona had not prepared anything to eat in the confusion of moving in, so she helped herself to Boo Boo's dinner as if it were only natural.

The leaf house had no kitchen, so it was a super wild meal of venison cooked over a fire out back with only some rock salt for flavor. Boo Boo had originally planned to eat it raw, so Sutriona's intrusion may not have been all bad.

"You need to watch out for the humans even more than the Nonhumans or even the Break News. Even though they're weak…no, *because* they're weak, they change the world in ways you would never expect."

"Can you make this easier to understand?"

"Sure. Since I look like this, I occasionally visit the inn town pretending to be a human."

There was a small pile of large red flower petals next to Sutriona. If Beatrice had been there, she might have said they looked like hibiscus petals. They came from the Crimson Heaven Flower and Sutriona had been munching on them like snacks while the meat cooked. They were slightly toxic, so Boo Boo did not touch them.

"Thanks to that, I've seen and heard for myself what they do. I know what those humans tend to be thinking."

"Beatrice is a good person, so I bet all humans are good people. There are sometimes some weird ones, though."

"It would be nice if it was that simple, but she's actually an exception when it comes to humans. Humans are a selfish species."

"But they've promised they're just here to visit the Labyrinth so they won't hurt us."

"That's not because they're afraid of Ground's Nir's residents or because they're considerate. They just want to prove they're not here to conquer our world and to show off how gentlemanly they are by following the rules."

"Hm? Can you tell a good person from a bad person, Sutriona?"

"Keh heh heh. When you've lived as long as I have, it comes naturally. I don't even need to take a direct look at the color of their soul. The look on their face and the tone of their voice is all I need to see to the very depths of their heart. It's the same for human and Nonhuman alike. Incidentally, you fall under 'not

bad', so rejoice."

Sutriona roasted the venison stuck on the end of a wooden stick and let the heat remove the excess fat.

"Do you know what they're so desperate to accomplish? How to produce a new preservative known as Imortalise. …It's apparently a chemical that prevents food from rotting. With that, they could store it indefinitely and transport it indefinitely. If it can be carried longer distances, they claim they can obtain equality between the places with so much food it rots and the places with so little food the people starve."

"I'm no good with complicated things."

Sutriona responded to Boo Boo's words by moving the meat in the fire a little.

"It means they could leave this on the ground around here and it wouldn't rot. If the rumors about Imortalise are accurate, it would last a month or two. If the food doesn't rot, the extra food can be shared with people who live far away, right?"

"Hm? That sounds like a good thing to me."

"At face value, yes. …But if you can quickly transport as much food as you want, you can also make use of far more soldiers, right? Eternal Foods will provide absolute certainty to the safety of food. Canning, freezing, drying, and vacuum packing still leave a modicum of risk, but this will eliminate even that. That means the beginning of a world in which *anyone can easily start a war.*"

"What's a war?"

"The loss of many lives. It's an unpleasant topic, but you need people to kill people, right? A lot of killing requires a large force of people. And the food is actually more important than the weapons, Boo Boo. Plus, if they can sell a whole bunch of food, they can use that money to buy weapons."

Sutriona put on a cynical and crafty smile that did not suit her appearance.

"A dictator's conscripted soldiers might obey their orders to eat rotten bread and meat that reeks of chemicals, but it seems wars these days are fought between 'kings'. That is, between the wealthy nations. If word gets around that

you will be sickened from within by your own allies if you go to war, no one will volunteer. And they can't go to war if they can't gather an army, so I can see why they're eager to ensure the safety of the food if those 'kings' wish to wage war."

She somewhat changed the subject from there.

"Anyway, few are powerful enough to start a war and fewer still have the true power needed to maintain a war indefinitely. That's why wars are not so easily started. A poor command will only wear down your own country. If you want a peaceful world, it's important to maintain a system that *makes going to war difficult.*"

Sutriona bit off a small piece of the meat she had cooked, but it must have been too hot because she stuck her tongue out.

"Everyone's gone to so much trouble creating that unreliable suspension bridge and now someone wants to swap it out for a stone bridge with absolute reliability. Wars of no-risk and high-return will begin. And no matter how many foolish commands are given, the wars will continue. People will begin investing in that *great and unreachable industry* as casually as in the development of a housewife's nifty little invention."

"…"

"And since supporting the food supply looks charitable and humane, no one can stop them from developing it on a large scale. In other words, the exploration of the Labyrinth and the conversion of Experience Points into Magic is nothing more than the humans competing to see *who can first obtain a method of economizing war and who can monopolize that method.* …Of course, I have my doubts that very many of them are even looking beyond the vast sums of money to see that their decisions here could lead to the destruction of their own civilization."

Boo Boo fell silent for a while.

He glanced over at the wood-carved human statue sitting near the fire. It showed a human as a messenger of heaven, just as the Nonhuman oral tradition stated.

Only the crackling of the fire could be heard.

“Humans are good people. They wouldn’t want to do that war thing.”

“Don’t be so sure. Based on what I’ve heard, they can only use Magic here. So no matter how much they fight here, they can only bring back so much. First on that list are the Pieces. We need to be aware that they are almost certainly preparing for war.”

“What good is war? They’d all be happier if they ate food, lay down, and took a nap together.”

“For better or for worse, humans are a clever bunch. They have such a great desire for ever greater happiness that they end up trampling the happiness they already have. Although very few of them seem to even notice it.”

“But Beatrice wouldn’t do that. She doesn’t kill more than she needs to eat.”

“Boo Boo, it’s about who gets it first.” Sutriona gave a faint smile. “She can say she won’t do it all day long, but there’s nothing she can do if someone else gets their hands on it. And if that happens, it will lead to an age that works against her. So whether she wants it or not, she has to secure those Pieces. It’s either take them or have them taken. Those are the only options available to the human countries.”

“I refuse to believe that.” The giant Orc grew stubborn. “Beatrice wouldn’t do something so horrible. She’s way smarter than me, so she would use all her brains to make sure that didn’t happen.”

“That would be nice…”

The girl in a black ribbon dress sighed before saying more.

“Whatever the case, the humans can’t relax right now. You need to be especially careful about a Guild named Elkiad. Not only is there a severe moral hazard at work inside their ranks, but they’re different from the other Guilds on a fundamental level.”

“Yeah. Beatrice said that too. I remember her talking about Ensoed.”

“Only the first and last letters of that are right, Boo Boo.”

Part 9

Beatrice returned to Ground's Nir.

It was a small island, but she enjoyed the freedom there. A Break News would occasionally go on a rampage and significantly alter the landscape, but it was generally a peaceful and simple world.

It may have been because she could use Magic, but the world seemed to spread out endlessly before her despite the limited surface area. The underground Labyrinth was suspected to reach other islands or continents from the ocean floor or even pass through a Transfer wall to reach other dimensions, but she found the normal forests and beaches felt larger than the complex Labyrinth.

She walked to the inn town and found White Witch Filinion and Fighter Priest Armelina enjoying some tea at a café. If they were indulging themselves, it meant they had sold some field guides or maps for plenty of gears rather than paper money.

Beatrice asked a question without ordering anything for herself.

"How's the Setup going?"

"All done."

"We have a place ready, so we're ready when you are."

The three of them left the café and walked down a stone-paved road.

They passed by a great variety of people. There were Knights with bulky armor and large shields, there were lightly-equipped Thieves, there were Hunters and Scouts who specialized in projectiles, and there were even provocative Dancers. The only point in common was the Shining Weapons of various shapes and sizes they all carried. There were obvious ones like swords and spears, but there were also tents, frying pans, brooms, magnifying glasses, and more.

"Where exactly is it?"

“There’s a district to the south that’s been deserted ever since there was a fire. We’ll be borrowing a place there.”

“…Oh, the waterway district.”

“Huh? Why do you sound so blue, Beatrice?”

“No reason,” she said as a non-answer.

Humans could travel between their own world and Ground’s Nir, but the Nonhumans could not. Other than the Shining Weapons, no objects could either. That was why people worked so hard to bring back the data known as Experience Points.

That meant anyone who died in Ground’s Nir…that is, anyone who lost their life and became a mere “object” could not be brought back. No matter how it happened, anyone who died here could not be buried in their homeland’s soil.

But Fighter Priest Armelina didn’t seem to care about those sentimental issues.

“I bet it’s because she always has so much trouble with water. Even in the Labyrinth, she’s always getting dragged away by the octopus-type Gimmicks and getting the bucket-type Traps dumped right on her head in the underground waterways. It never takes her long to end up soaking wet and all see-through. It’s always the same sad story with the strongest fire user.”

“Th-that isn’t true.”

“Ohh? Can you say that again after checking through these results? One look at your Event List and Conversation Log goes a long way toward inspiring the imagination. You should be thankful I was kind enough not to save Replay videos. And looking at this, you really do have trouble with water.”

“Curse you!! Either erase those records right this instant or I’ll turn them and your Shining Weapon to ashes! The choice is yours!!”

Perhaps due to a management issue, her ahoge began burning with a torch flame as she shouted.

At the same time, a small girl with a hood pulled deep over her head passed by.

In that instant, a voice seemed to slip into Beatrice’s ear.

“Be careful. They’re already on the move.”

Beatrice looked back, but there was no sign of the girl in the crowd.

“Is something the matter, Beatrice?”

“No…it’s nothing.”

She shook her head and started walking again, but Armelina still seemed bothered by her behavior.

“What, did someone try to hit on you? Did you feel a bolt of lightning when you saw your soulmate!? You’d never run across a knight in shining armor in a concrete jungle ruled by big data, but this is a fantasy world of swords and magic! Anything goes here!! Heh heh!!”

“Armelina, you’re surprisingly girly. You believe in soulmates?”

“No, no, I don’t! D-don’t be ridiculous. I’m a Fighter Priest, so I’m all about who can punch the hardest!!”

Armelina blushed and began fiercely swinging her hands around.

“Yes, she does seem like the type that believes in the red thread of fate or four leaf clovers.”

“Eh? You mean collecting four leaf clovers doesn’t bring good luck?”

This revelation brought a shadow over Armelina’s face and her shoulders drooped.

“A-anyway, Beatrice. Is it true you’re going out with a huge pig-faced Iberian Orc? I keep hearing rumors about that around the inn town.”

“Kh!! Th-the flow of time is cruel, but I have no regrets!! A-and he doesn’t have a pig face! It’s, um, uh, a slack boar face!!”

“Oh, dear. Does this mean you aren’t building up conversational Experience Points by interacting with other races like some of the others do? It sounds more like you’ve fallen for someone with a kind heart.”

“No, I wouldn’t put it like that. Saying someone is ‘kind’ is the same as saying they’re convenient, don’t cause any problems, and are easy to make use of, right? But Boo Boo is completely different. Setting aside whether he’s kind, he’s

most certainly not convenient, he causes all sorts of problems, and I can't make use of him at all."

"But you are with him, aren't you?"

"Well, he's comfortable. I don't have to think about all the intrigue around him. …And in Ground's Nir that's rare. It's worth a lot to have someone who you can speak honestly with while letting the weight off your shoulders and not trying to get anything out of it. That's how I feel about Boo Boo."

The White Witch and Fighter Priest exchanged a glance at her words…or rather, at her expression.

"Oh, I see."

"Hm, so that's it."

"Wh-what are those know-it-all looks for?"

"Well, we'd assumed everything we'd been hearing was nothing more than rumors, but let's just say this is better than what we were expecting."

"I think it's great. You're not a monk in training, so it's nice that you have more to focus on than entering the Labyrinth, earning Experience Points, and learning Magic."

After turning a corner, the lively energy of the crowd suddenly vanished. The stone-paved road and the brick buildings were not destroyed and had not crumbled. In a town made of stone, a fire was not going to change the scene that dramatically. But all life had been stripped from the surfaces. It was a lot like sterilizing a plate with boiling water.

The Holy Swordswoman, White Witch, and Fighter Priest entered a random building and faced each other around a round table in the center.

They pulled out their differently-shaped Shining Weapons.

Holy Swordswoman Beatrice's was a rapier.

White Witch Filinion's was a white first-aid kit.

Fighter Priest Armelina's was a metal staff. However, it was made so she could add on chains and metal balls with Magic.

They placed their Shining Weapons on the round table. They placed the rapier and metal staff parallel to each other with the first-aid kit in the center.

“Having the strongest fire user sure is convenient. As long as we have you with us, we have one of the necessary Elements ready to go. It’s like getting dealt a joker in a game of poker.”

“I’m thankful to have you two. I can’t use any Element besides fire, right? And your expertise in Mixing is a huge help, Filinion.”

“Being able to share Magic and create Pieces within the same Party is really useful for the people as abnormal as us.”

As they spoke, they called up the data on the Piece they were after and found the Magic they needed for it.

This process was known as Mixing.

Beatrice thought it was more like a dinner or cocktail recipe than it was an industrial processing technique. What mattered was the type and distribution of Magic needed. The rest occurred at a scale one would need an electron microscope to see, so Beatrice and the others’ senses could not keep up. It was the same as shaking the cocktail shaker and knowing a delicious drink would be waiting afterwards.

Filinion pulled out a key hanging from her neck by a thin chain and stuck it into the keyhole on her first-aid kit Shining Weapon.

“The points we must stop are B-12, G-29, and Y-03. The effective detour points needed to avoid those are V-71 and P-01. …That will be the hottest point. Where should we start?”

“Why not from the most certain point? We start at P-01 and, if that works, we can reach for V-71 as insurance.”

“Nice. I like your resolve. It’s like felling the trunk without worrying about the branches and leaves.”

Three Shining Weapons sat on the abandoned round table. White Witch Filinion placed a transparent palm-sized crystal ball alongside the first-aid kit in the center. Various types of Magic would process that into the unknown

material known as a Piece.

“Now, let’s create the opposing tech. To review, what tech is it we want to keep out of the hands of the nations and corporations?”

“Imortalise. …B-12, G-29, and Y-03. These will create a composite technology that extracts a natural preservative with almost no health risks.”

“Then what is the Piece we’re creating? That is, the opposing tech brought about by V-71 and P-01?”

“Managed crops for unmaintained land. They’re wheat or potatoes that can grow in any wasteland or desert. I think it’s technically a chromosome-damaging ultraviolet emitter that messes with the seeds. Basically, the competition is between the idea of preservative-soaked ingredients being shipped around the world or the idea of crops actually being grown all over the world. And when the people are growing the crops, they can both eat them and use them for their livestock. That means as much meat and vegetables as they can eat.”

“If this works, the concept of a grain-producing region will vanish and the entire world will be covered in burgers and fries.”

“But…”

“Yes. No matter how much work is put into this tech, no one will ever complete it. *Even with V-71 or P-01.*”

But the people being manipulated would not notice. They would not be allowed to notice.

The preparations were complete. Corn grown for oil would solve desertification and the energy crisis. But couldn’t that be used to feed people and animals as well as for energy? Because they were always just one step away from achieving their goal, they would continue to reach for it.

That mistaken hope and expectation would completely crush Imortalise which was expected to pave the way to war.

They activated the three Shining Weapons.

The flashy explosions or slashes seen when exploring the Labyrinth were absent here. Instead, lines of pale light ran both inside and outside the

transparent crystal ball, showing that something was happening.

Bars appeared next to the Shining Weapons to show the status of the activated Magic and the progress of the overall work. When the slowly-moving bars filled all the way up, Beatrice breathed a sigh of relief.

“Did it…work?”

“I’ll check the structure just to be sure. …Yes, I don’t see any problems. Our P-01 matches the diagram exactly.”

Filinion touched the side of her glasses and Armelina gave a casual comment.

“So which one of us is going to break this down and register it?”

“As always, I’d like to ask Beatrice. She has the most straightforward strength and a third party would see her as the hardest one to attack.”

“Tch. See? I always end up being the villain.”

Beatrice sounded annoyed, but she still grabbed the transparent crystal ball from the table.

If she scanned it with her Shining Weapon and registered it as data, she could bring the world-changing Piece back to their world. If she released it online, the corporations and research institutions would make a technical breakthrough and give actual form to new technology that would change history.

The world was an easy thing to change.

And this was not their first time doing so.

All fields and all industries always contained the possibility of a paradigm shift. It sounded nice when it was called the blossoming of previously closed-off possibilities, but it was little different from having everyone carelessly riding around in time machines.

(We really need to be careful.)

Just as Beatrice was staring at the crystal ball Piece and about to look to her Shining Weapon, she heard the room's window shattering.

Something had been thrown in from outside.

She looked over without thinking but stopped moving as soon as she saw the fist-sized sphere rolling along the uncarpeted floor.

Something was packed in a leather bag and a fuse about as long as the first joint of a little finger stuck out from the bag.

It happened a moment later.

An earsplitting boom hit her eardrums and refused to go away as a blinding flash filled the room.

It was a flashbang, aka a stun grenade. The nonlethal weapon used light and sound beyond the acceptable limits of human senses to rob the target of their senses while also dazing them for at least a few seconds and possibly a few dozen seconds. Even the toughest man would flinch if lightning struck right next to him and this was a continuous version of the same sensation.

And even if it lacked the ability to kill, it was obvious what would happen to someone targeted by another weapon when they were blind, deaf, and curled up in a defenseless daze.

Attackers with hoods hiding their faces rushed inside from the front door, the window, and the back entrance.

But before they could activate their Shining Weapons which resembled short swords and short bows, a downpour of orange flame arrows assaulted them. As soon as they hit, the arrows created miniature explosions that pushed the attackers back toward the entrances and tossed them outside.

Protected behind rapier-wielding Beatrice's back, the White Witch removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes over and over.

"I feel the need to reiterate my point about how useful it is to have the strongest fire user with us."

"I'm just used to the light and sound of my own fire attacks. They're no match for sunglasses and earplugs, but I do keep reduction Magic in stock." The

crimson Holy Swordswoman smiled a little. “And we’re even since you made this so much easier for me. Visualizing the kinetic reactions detected through the wall to display silhouettes? It isn’t flashy, but it’s a pretty useful support technique.”

“Well, support is all my Job can do.”

“If only you didn’t insist on jiggling those giant boobs every time you did something.”

“Th-that has nothing to do with this!!”

Filinion blushed and snapped back at Armelina.

Illusion Magic displayed a digital countdown over the heads of the collapsed attackers. The White Witch was very effective at life-related techniques, so she had used a Mixed potion to determine the enemy’s level of consciousness and give an estimated time until they came to.

The men were all hiding below their hooded cloaks. When Beatrice’s Party inspected them, they found they were lightly equipped and wore no armor. However, they did not seem to have built up their defenses with Magic either. Instead, they had crude, poorly-made paper. With layer after layer of that under their clothes, they had created light defenses that protected against any penetrative force.

(Almost like…bulletproof armor?)

“Anyway, what was that just now!? It wasn’t Magic, was it!?”

“Wasn’t it obvious? A flashbang. They’re in all sorts of movies and video games these days.”

“A flashbang… But we can only bring Pieces back from Ground’s Nir and we can’t bring any weapons into Ground’s Nir. So how!?”

Fighter Priest Armelina was confused and she activated her metal staff Shining Weapon. A spiked metal ball appeared on the end. When she swung it around a little and hit the wall, the entire wall crumbled and the fragments flew outward.

“They may not have brought it with them,” said Beatrice as she looked toward this new exit since the door was likely being watched. “The primary ingredient in

a flashbang is magnesium powder. If you know how to make one, it would probably be possible with materials found in Ground's Nir. The rest is just like Mixing. It wouldn't be hard."

"Are you serious? Then are these guys who I think they are?"

The Fighter Priest looked down at her feet as she stepped over the rubble.

They had left the back way, but attackers with Shining Weapons had been waiting there too. However, these men had been caught in the sudden destruction of the wall and either sent flying or knocked unconscious by the flying rubble.

Fighter Priest Armelina was also receiving visual support from Filinion, so she had likely known the silhouettes were there when she broke through the wall.

"B-12, G-29, and Y-03… These are the people who want to send those Pieces to the corporations and complete the Imortalise preservative that will help provide military supplies. These are the people who want to use it for military purposes. These are the people who want to go to war. Now, do we know a Guild that's gone into full moral hazard mode and completely ignores etiquette and traditional methods?"

"Oh, so that's what this is…"

"Their ideology is the opposite of ours."

"Elkiad."

Based on the countdown above the collapsed attackers' heads, they would not wake up for another twenty minutes. Their gloves left just the index finger exposed and that finger was covered with a characteristic tattoo. Everyone who joined them had to dedicate their killing finger to the Guild as a sort of ritual.

Beatrice held the transparent crystal ball in her hand.

"They were trying to keep me from registering this. That way they can keep the world from moving in a direction they don't want."

"So what do we do? Do you think you can register it real quick? I doubt this was all they're going to do, so you should probably hurry it up."

"Given my Shining Weapon's processing power, it would take about five

minutes. Can you two hold them off on your own for that long? One of you is a White Witch that can only heal and the other is a Fighter Priest that can't heal despite being a priest."

"Then we'll have to put off registering the Piece and escape to a safe place first."

"And we can't Sign Out like this. We're too far away from the individual Gates and, even if we were near a Gate, that process takes two or three minutes to finish. With that much time, they'd turn us into pincushions with those short bows!"

"That's why we just have to force our way through. We need to at least shake them from our tail. Filinion, kinetic reactions alone aren't enough. Add on a visualization of encounter rates."

They had a plan.

They were not about to rush out onto the main road out front. They would continue through the narrow back alleys and eventually reach another road.

Thanks to one of White Witch Filinion's Mixed potions, numbers danced in the corner of their eyes. The numbers that moved up and down in the 20-30% range were a visualization of the threat directed at them. In other words, the probability of running across an enemy soldier or having an arrow fly their way.

But Beatrice had made a single mistake.

It was true Elkiad had made a flashbang from materials found in Ground's Nir and she had thought they had used it alongside their Shining Weapons to attack Beatrice's Party.

But a moment later, the encounter rate shot up from the 20-30% range to 99.9%.

It happened suddenly.

A fingertip-sized dark red hole appeared in the center of Beatrice's chest.

The belated blast sounded like someone had pierced a hole in the world itself.

Now. When she realized she had been shot by a sniper rifle, did she realize her mistaken assumption?

Part 10

On a rooftop, a man with a characteristic tattoo covering his right hand's index finger held a long narrow gun made from nearly a meter of steel and wood. He peered through the handmade scope made by placing a glass lens inside a skinny wooden tube and he let out a very, very small breath.

The spotter next to him was observing the scene while crouched on one knee and he gave a report to the ground groups using the club-like Shining Weapon that took the place of a communicator.

"Waffle here. Target 1 was hit but survived. 2 and 3 retrieved her and are hiding behind cover. They are fleeing to the west. I am visualizing their silhouettes, but what I have on hand can't see through buildings."

The sniper rifles they were using were not precise industrial products.

The history of firearms was a long one. It dated all the way back to around the 15th century.

This was a flintlock musket much like the ones displayed in the pirate section of a museum. It was muzzle-loaded, meaning the gunpowder and bullet had to stuffed into the muzzle and pushed down with a long, skinny ramrod. It could launch a bullet the size of a pachinko ball as far as three hundred meters even without rifling and could hit a target at half that range using the handmade scope, so this version had undergone a bizarre form of evolution.

And in a location filled with buildings, the ability to accurately shoot someone between the eyes at a hundred meters was more valuable than the ability to shoot through a car's fuel tank at a thousand meters.

On the ground, a few groups of four were receiving support from the roof as they moved to seal off the narrow but winding alleyways.

While following the trail of blood on the ground, they released the leash of the Hellhounds that each group had been supplied with. They barked an order while

releasing them and the well-trained four-legged beasts ran on ahead.

“Donut here. Target location detected. We have the Hellhounds in pursuit to confirm it with multiple sources. If they’re cornered in the west or north, they will almost certainly move to the street. Once they do, the snipers just have to finish them off. Everyone, synchronize your maps.”

The primary flaw of muzzle-loading guns was the time it took to load each shot, so firing in quick succession was difficult. One temporary solution was to carry around several shorter guns in addition to the main one they held. It was faster to switch guns than to load another bullet. This too was a method favored by the pirates of an older age.

Another ground group was allowing their targets through according to plan.

Elkiad’s goal was not individual glory. It was to eliminate the target as efficiently as possible.

“Éclair here. We’ve opened the north route. If you block the western route, they’ll naturally come this-gagyah!?” The report was cut off by a sudden explosion.

While supported by the White Witch’s shoulder, Beatrice breathed heavily and held out her Shining Weapon rapier. Orange sparks danced around the tip.

There was no sign of the dark red hole that had appeared in the center of her chest before.

However, she did not look unharmed. Her face was pale and yet her entire body was covered in an unpleasant sweat. Her body was sending out a mess of contradictory signals.

“Are you really okay?”

Armelina sounded worried and Filinion placed her first-aid kit on a barrel while lending Beatrice her shoulder. Filinion then pulled test tubes of dried herbs and small bottles of liquid from inside her cloak and the belt around her thigh. She dumped the contents into the first-aid kit, forced the lid closed, stuck the key in the keyhole, and turned it.

A bar appeared on the first-aid kit and it slowly filled up. Numbers appeared saying it would take thirty seconds for the Mixing to complete and the success rate was 98.8%.

“I immediately removed the bullet from your chest, so of course you’re worn out. I mean, Healing Magic can’t do everything.”

Filinion was more worried about her own Willpower gauge. If it ran out, the Mixing would stall and the healing would stop. That gauge could be seen as the entire Party’s lifeline. It would recover on its own, but it would of course run out if she used so much Magic that it depleted faster than it recovered.

“You work up a resistance, so the amount it heals goes down with each use. So please don’t think about relying on it to charge into the gunfire in zombie mode or something.”

“I know that.”

Beatrice’s Percentage-type Magic amplified her Parameters and gave her superhuman strength and speed, but that had actually worked against her. The bullet would have done less damage if it had cleanly pierced straight through her. At the very least, they would not have had to *dig it out of her*.

“But we have to push on. The problem is the snipers that can catch us off guard, but now that we know they’re there…”

Reinforcements must have been sent in, either due to the explosion or the lack of response from their comrade.

New men with muskets leaned out from a corner in the narrow alleyway.

There was more than just the one gunshot. They were equipped with multiple single-shot guns and they were working in a group.

But the encounter rate did not rise beyond the 10-15% range. Beatrice’s Party was being fired on at close range, but none of the bullets hit them.

Phototaxis created flashing lights around the user which shifted the enemy’s focus.

Mirage bent light such that an image of oneself was created in a slightly shifted position.

Fair Wind created wind with heat and used that to give an extra push to the enemy's blade or bullet, shifting their aim.

Each "shift" was small and they were not enough to deflect a sword or axe swung with enough force to slice right through someone, but when added together, they increased the margin of error needed to save a human life. Even in a hail of deadly bullets.

In other words…

"Magic is superior. Armelina, get to work!!"

"Sure thing!! I'll blow them away, wall and all!!"

When Armelina activated her Shining Weapon that resembled a metal staff, a chain wrapped in light and a metal ball appeared on the end. They tore through the alleyway corner that Elkiad was using for cover. The many building materials and the attackers were knocked to the opposite wall.

If not for the Percentage-type Magic protecting their bodies, the attackers would have been killed instantly.

Armelina was a Priest, so she made sure to raise the middle finger of her empty hand as elegantly as possible.

"Hah! So all you had were some fossils from a museum? If you want to keep up with us, you should've at least brought a rocket launcher!!"

An Elkiad man was listening in from the main street with Magic that worked much like a directional microphone. Once its effects wore off, he lightly raised a hand.

The subordinate standing next to him rested a firing tube on his shoulder and removed the safety pin from the front end of the warhead. The weapons that followed the original designs had been called fossils, but this was a bizarre Galapagos weapon of their own design.

The man covered his ears with his hands and spoke with a smile.

"Well, if you insist."

With an earsplitting roar, the explosive flew toward the alleyway entrance with a trail of white smoke behind it.

The threat probability spiked to 100% once more.

Part 11

Boo Boo wanted a meal of fish today.

Thus, he was walking along a hill to search for a palm-sized bamboo leaf-shaped piece of wood he could make into a lure.

That was when he heard an explosion.

He looked over and saw grayish smoke rising from one part of the inn town at the base of the hill.

Next to him, Fairy Queen Sutriona stripped off a hooded cloak in annoyance to reveal her flower-like appearance and black ribbon dress.

“So it’s started.”

“I’ve heard of this. The humans use something called fireworks. Is there a festival today?”

“This is something far more frightening, Boo Boo.”

The girl Break News’s voice contained a hint of exasperation, but it was not directed at Boo Boo. It was directed at the humans who continued to act so foolishly down below.

“What a pain. I didn’t want to intervene in a conflict between humans, but if that inn town is destroyed, I won’t be able to eat the tasty treats they make there. I might be able to manage a popsicle, but that ice cream is beyond my abilities. Now, what to do about this?”

“?”

“This is about your friend, Boo Boo. It is about Beatrice.”

His giant body shook when he heard Sutriona's words.

"Elkiad is on the move. Their target is Beatrice because they don't want her group getting in ahead of them. This is a fight over that new preservative called Imortalise, which would fill the world with food and erase the limiting factor that empty stomachs place on war."

"I'm no good with complicated things. But I want to know about Beatrice, so can you make it simpler?"

"Basically, *the war has already begun,* Boo Boo. Will Beatrice's group bring back the Piece or will Elkiad? Even if these things are made public, whichever economic bloc they prioritize will begin a global trend in that direction. This is the final fork in the road, so they will do whatever it takes, no matter how dirty their methods. …To make it simpler for you, Boo Boo, millions are going to die and they are making a tightrope walk to determine where those deaths will occur."

"I don't believe that." The hideous pig-face shook his head. "Like I said, Beatrice isn't that kind of person. She's smarter than me, so she has to be thinking about so much more than me to find a way that won't hurt anyone."

"Boo Boo, the advance of technology cannot be stopped. Even if you kill the designer of a secret weapon, someone else will eventually come up with the same idea. The only difference is who comes up with it and where their affiliations lie. No one can prevent the new technology itself from being created, no one can hold it back, and no one can erase it from existence. Once it has been discovered, someone will use it. That is simply the human way."

Humans visited the Labyrinth.

They did so to efficiently earn Experience Points and learn Magic.

With Magic, they could process a variety of things and create fragments known as Pieces.

By turning those to data and bringing them back with them, human society could achieve technological breakthroughs.

Apparently, even the most basic of assumptions could be overturned.

…Or millions could be killed.

“Then they just have to stop bringing them back. If they hide the Pieces forever, they won’t cause any problems.”

“Boo Boo… The benefit of a Piece is only enjoyed by the person who first registers it. So even if the original discoverer hides it, if a second discoverer registers it, they will be seen as the first in the official records. And if they bring it back to the human world and the nations and corporations go for it…”

Sutriona ended her explanation partway through.

She fell silent.

She stopped to think.

“…Wait.”

“?”

“Could that be what’s going on here? Is Beatrice’s group making opposing patent requests…? In other words, is she competing for the standard while leading them into a dead end?”

“Explain it so I can understand.”

“Very well. This is something I have overhead the humans talking about. They do not know where their Pieces are used or for what. They simply make them, take them back, and submit them. And the nations and corporations are constantly searching through the thousands or tens of thousands of released Pieces in case one of them might provide a breakthrough on some stalled secret research.”

“Hmm…”

“Was that too complicated? Basically, it isn’t a simple case of Person A having a problem and Person B preparing a solution. If Person A has a problem, they can work with Person C or D if need be. …Even if the provided answer is a false answer dressed up to look nice.”

“???”

“What I’m saying is this.” Sutriona raised her skinny index finger. “Beatrice’s

group may be trying to intentionally submit a mistaken Piece. That way the entire world will reach a technological dead end and no one will be able to wage war."

Boo Boo tilted his head again.

He may have had trouble picturing it.

"Would that really stop everyone? Does giving the wrong answer really change anything if someone finds the right answer afterwards?"

"Boo Boo, there are two types of technology: those with a clear right answer and a clear wrong answer, and those with two competing right answers. For example, what do you think of the Magic the humans use?"

"I can't use Magic, so I don't really know. They all do weird beepy things."

"That's right. But there isn't actually a reason it had to be that way. Ground's Nir's Magic holds endless possibility, but that level of freedom is so great they seem to have trouble grasping it. They need to place limitations on it so they can comprehend it themselves, so rather than the secret techniques of legend, they use a more familiar and easy-to-picture system. That is, what they call a video game."

"You mean there might have been other forms of Magic?"

"Yes. It could just as easily have been reciting strange incantations or drawing out magic circles. It isn't an issue of which one is right; it's an issue of which is more convenient. The one more people tended to use became the standard."

"Then…"

"Let's say you have System A and System B. What if System A is actually superior, but System B is announced on a grand scale first. And what if they were hiding that System B is actually entirely useless and will never make a completed product even after a century of work? Wouldn't everyone be so blinded by System B that they would ignore System A?"

"But what if someone secretly worked on System A?"

"Society won't let them. Once the cannonball starts rolling, it is apparently very hard to stop. There are people doing the research, people making the parts,

people assembling the parts, people selling it, and people who want to use it… Even if someone tries to stop it, someone else will prevent them because they need it to continue. The video standards are apparently a well-known example. Not that this has anything to do with those like us who live freely." Sutriona laughed. "And war is all about timing. If you miss the right time to start it, the system built for that purpose will no longer have a use. Not to mention the great financial cost of maintaining it. The deception might eventually be discovered, but if they set it up so it's too late by the time that happens, the countdown to war might fall apart."

In that case, Elkiad's goal was also obvious. They wanted war, so they would secretly provide the corporation with the materials needed to produce the technology for war. But if the target corporation looked elsewhere, Elkiad could no longer guide them to the desired technology. And a Piece was meaningless on its own. It was only useful to someone who had come to a technological dead end and was stuck despite the extremely advanced technology they had accumulated.

"In other words…"

"Beatrice may not be a bad person. Of course, this is only a possibility."

Boo Boo fell silent.

He looked to the inn town at the bottom of the hill.

He could hear consecutive bursting noises from there. He had initially thought those were the sounds of a festival, but now they transformed into something horribly uneasy and unsettling.

"What is Beatrice doing?"

"It sounds like she ran into some trouble with Elkiad."

"She said to run away if I heard the name Elkiad."

"That's because she didn't want you to see this."

Boo Boo made up his mind when he heard that.

He adjusted his grip on his giant Shining Weapon that resembled a steel beam or log.

“I’m going.”

“Going where?”

“To the inn town. To Beatrice.”

“Looking like that? I can get by with my appearance, but you will cause a commotion the second you set foot in the town. You normally stay away from the town and roads because you don’t want to scare people, right?”

“That has nothing to do with the fact that Beatrice is in trouble.”

“Everything I said about her was mere speculation. There might not be an opposing patent and she might simply be the kind of person who is willing to allow millions of deaths if it supports her own country or corporation. The only way to know for sure is to peek into their world.”

“I can just ask her,” he said.

He had no proof and no guarantee. After enough work and pain to lose everything he had gained, it could all be for nothing.

But he said it regardless.

“I just have to find her and ask her directly.”

It was his trust in her that led him to run toward the human inn town where everyone would be an enemy.

Part 12

Simply following the alleyways along the roads was not going to work.

The Holy Swordswoman, White Witch, and Fighter Priest ran inside an abandoned building, climbed the stairs, broke through the wall, and took a shortcut to the neighboring building on that middle floor. They used Magic to divert the sniper bullets that flew in through the windows, they flinched back from the explosives that tried to envelop the entire floor in flames, and they

continued making progress without being cornered.

“This is insane… They actually fired a rocket when I asked for one. What the hell was that?”

“They had handheld rockets in the Edo period. They were called Bo-hiya.”

“Y-yeah, but it doesn’t look like they’re simply using a three hundred year old weapon.”

They used Magic to call up a map of the inn town, but it was entirely useless because both enemy and ally were breaking down walls in the complex labyrinth of buildings.

And of course, the three of them were far from unharmed.

“I can’t believe this… I thought I had built up a decent Puncture Resistance and Arrow Resistance, but they’re breaking right through…”

“Bullets must need their own form of Resistance…”

They only looked unharmed because White Witch Filinion would Mix them a recovery potion every time they were badly injured. But as mentioned before, that was not all powerful. They built up a resistance, so it healed less each time it was used. Their bodies had grown pale and they could tell the potions would no longer stop the bleeding after a few more uses.

That resistance would reset when they returned from Ground’s Nir, but they would not be in so much trouble in the first place if they had time to do that. The Gate for Signing Out was still a long way off.

“I-I’m sorry…”

The White Witch apologized while leaning on Beatrice’s shoulder.

The situation had been reversed after the first sniper attack, but now she was terribly weak. Her Job was not meant to stand on the front line. As soon as it had become clear that she was the healer, the attacks had concentrated on her. On top of the actual damage, using her Magic wore down her Willpower, so this was hardly surprising.

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“No, not that. I think I’m at my limit. I’m feeling really dizzy and I don’t think I can stay conscious much longer…”

The first-aid kit she used for Mixing was weakly opening and closing.

“Hey, wait.”

“The Recovery Magic is using up my Willpower faster than it recovers… I won’t be any more use. If I can’t use Recovery Magic, I’ll just weigh you down. Please leave me behind…”

Filinion tightened her grip on the first-aid kit’s handle and key. She could likely see what was left in her gauge because her eyes were wandering through empty air. Beatrice considered having it set so she could see too, but she did not use the Magic for that. That was not what was needed right now.

“Don’t be silly. Getting discouraged like that will only use up your Willpower faster. And be quiet for a moment!”

Next to them, Fighter Priest Armelina leaned against the hallway wall.

She had not lost her will to fight, but it must have been a shock for their healer to wear out first.

If they continued like this, they would be slowly tormented to death. And the result would be little different if they surrendered to Elkiad thanks to the Guild’s moral hazards.

“Really now, what do we do?” The Fighter Priest felt an unpleasant sweat on her pale face. “Magic is stronger than bullets, but isn’t there something different about these guys? I’m not sure how to put it… You could say we have the upper hand 1000-to-10 in pure power, but they use that 10 to hit our vitals from a blind spot with the accuracy of threading a needle. They have no waste or inefficiency…”

Yes. Looking at nothing but strength, Beatrice or Armelina could overwhelm Elkiad with their Magic. If they wanted to, they could blow away this entire section of the town.

But doing that would change nothing.

Even if they were 99% successful, a bullet would slip through the 1% gap and

accurately pierce their flesh. The more destruction they caused, the less cover there was and the more gunfire would reach them. And if they went too far, the damage would extend behind this ghost town area. They could not solve this by indiscriminately spreading destruction like a Break News.

To sum it up…

“This isn’t like anything we’ve come across before. It’s like playing go and finding your opponent is using chess pieces.”

It was like a chess problem.

No matter where they fled, they would be in someone’s line of fire. The enemy was not thinking about individual accomplishments. They were simply doing everything they could to remove the enemy pieces from the board. Even if that meant using themselves as bait.

The 100% encounter rate that visualized the threat seemed to pierce through their souls.

There was only one thing this reminded them of.

“That isn’t surprising… Elkiad doesn’t come from a normal background like us. They must be the army of the nation that wants to go to war.”

“A real…army? Honestly, a lovely college girl has to take on an army? What has the world come to?”

“And it’s kind of disturbing that they’re a disciplined army. With the kind of moral hazards we’re seeing here, I can’t believe they’re eating on the taxpayer’s dime and having action movies made about them back in our world.”

They did not have time to grow angry over every little thing.

“What do we do? If they’re going to get their hands on it otherwise, we could always destroy the Piece as a last resort.”

“That would be meaningless. If they silence us afterwards, it’s all over. P-01 is only bait meant to guide development in the wrong direction. The war they want will start if we don’t register the bait Piece first to distract everyone from the B-12, G-29, and Y-03 that Elkiad wants to make.”

The assumed filename was “Atlantic Sovereignty War”.

Basically, traditional high-class brands such as bags, jewelry, and wine were suffering as the middle class was stolen by the increased quality of low-cost manufacturers. There was also a conflict between the European nations that were becoming marred by excessively nationalistic far-right ideologies and America which simply wanted to go to war with someone due to their extended IT recession.

In both cases, it was less a desire to stand at the center of the world and more a matter of pride. That is, they did not want to be seen as inferior to the other.

During the confusion, South America and Western Africa were dragged into the flames of war and greedy hands reached out for them on the pretext of protecting them.

Everyone was so focused on those areas that the Middle East, the Far East, and Southeast Asia went ignored and new potential wars were beginning to pop up here and there.

The talk of ridiculous wars held so much sway because everyone had been taken in by the delusion that the food supply system supported by Imortalise would be complete soon and the true “kings” could easily wage war without taking any external or internal damage.

So saying one simple thing would solve all these problems at once:

I won’t let that happen. I’ll guide us onto a mistaken set of rails and get the heavy cannonball rolling so it will continue to spin fruitlessly forevermore.

They would not allow those cruel and hopefully imaginary wars from occurring.

They would build up a technology to rival the new technology that would truly distort the world and they would intentionally trigger a competition over what would be adopted as the standard. They would move the people in a direction that would never be completed no matter how much research was done. And even if someone noticed the mistake, the heavy cannonball of society would crush them if they tried to stop it. That would prevent anyone from moving to a different set of rails in the future.

As always and as many times as it took, *Beatrice would not allow the rise of any technology that would not bring people happiness.*

“Please leave me behind,” repeated White Witch Filinion. “This isn’t just our problem anymore… If we all die here, that war born of hopeless delusions will actually happen. So if just one of us survives and registers the bait Piece, that war won’t happen. So I’ll create a diversion for you…”

Beatrice almost shouted back on reflex.

But something else happened before she could.

Almost like a school’s broadcast system, a man’s amplified voice came from all over the building. There was of course no broadcast equipment here, so it had to be some kind of Magic.

“Can you hear me, Beatrice?”

(He won’t just want to chat. There must be some other reason.)

“You’re always causing us a lot of trouble. Yes, always. This isn’t the first time. Come to think of it, have you figured out who we are yet? To be honest, I’d like to demand payment for the war profit we should have earned, but I’ll let it slide just this once. There are no war treaties or ROE here. There are no military police either. In this world, no one goes to trial even if someone ends up dead. So prepare yourself.”

“Be careful…”

She spoke quietly to the White Witch and Fighter Priest.

The threat probability slowly hovered between 20-30% before rising to the 50-60% range.

Death was approaching.

Once it reached 100%, unavoidable gunfire would reach them.

“This has to be about their footsteps. They’re making all this noise to drown out their footsteps as they surround us. Their formation must be almost complete by now. We need to assume they’re going to all attack at once.”

“Did you enjoy playing the philanthropist?” asked the man. “Did you think you had some connection to the wider world? Ha ha. Don’t make me laugh, Beatrice. What you’re doing is nothing more than a farce. You haven’t produced a damn thing. Please stop stealing our profit for that.”

Was he intentionally rubbing her the wrong way to improve the deception?

The Holy Swordswoman held her Shining Weapon tight and focused on her surroundings as the man spoke.

“You’re nothing more than a caged bird forbidden from leaving the Detached Magic Palace for fear of your inborn talent. How long is it going to take for you to realize food is food no matter who gives it to you, you birdbrain?”

Part 13

Elkiad’s combat zone reached as far as three hundred meters outside the ghost town region on the east of the inn town.

They of course had soldiers (with their guns hidden below hooded cloaks) posted near those outer edges, but they doubted anyone would be stupid enough to try to reach the center of the fighting.

The people looked surprised by the sounds of gunfire and explosions that should not have existed in Ground’s Nir, but they all understood how frightening those things were. Each of them probably had their own opinion on whether Magic or guns was stronger, but none of them were going to test their theory with their life.

Humans feared guns.

It was not a case of being caught off guard by something unknown. They were intimidated away because they knew all too well what this was.

They knew even if they had never used one.

So one of the guards, a soldier with his right index finger covered in the characteristic tattoo, was tense at first, but gradually began to relax. For one thing, there were no military police, no records, and no supervision here. He was one of the delinquent soldiers in full moral hazard mode here in Ground’s Nir. He had already lost the will to take his orders seriously, so his behavior was hardly

surprising.

But hadn't he been taught something at the very beginning?

Carrying out his orders was at the foundation of everything. Failing to do so put his own life and the lives of his entire unit at risk.

———First, a large – very large – shadow appeared over the soldier's head.

"Eh?"

———Next, he looked up and back, wondering if it was a cloud, only to find a giant form standing there.

"Eh?"

———Finally, that giant form raised a large Shining Weapon shaped like a steel beam or log.

"Eh?"

He did not have time to do anything.

Some strange creature had entered the human town. The Elkiad soldier's thoughts worked to comprehend the impossible sight, but his mind was not given a chance to reach a conclusion.

The horrific blunt weapon gave a roar and the soldier's entire body was buried below the stone pavement.

"…"

The oddity was quickly reported, but Boo Boo used his height of four meters to ignore it all.

As soon as he took another step forward, he was surrounded by Elkiad soldiers armed with large muskets and a variety of Shining Weapons such as two-handed swords, large swords as tall as their wielder, and halberds, war spears that looked like a combination of an axe, a spear, and a hook. Their numbers rapidly grew and soon rose above twenty, but Boo Boo did not care.

"I am going to Beatrice."

He announced his intentions as simply as possible.

“I will push through anyone who gets in my way. If you don’t like it, get out of the way, Elkiad.”

They did not respond. Or perhaps their silence was their response.

He took a step forward.

They held their many Shining Weapons at the ready and those weapons glittered in the light.

He took a second step forward.

They aimed their many guns and placed their fingers on the trigger.

He took a third step forward.

Then everything began to move.

Repeated dry bursting sounds rang out.

The Elkiad members were professional soldiers who had received a certain country’s official military training, but they had developed unique habits in Ground’s Nir that abandoned the manual. Simply put, they did not need to hide behind cover thanks to Magic. They could open a shield in front of themselves and fire from directly in front of their target. In fact, they could take up positions 360 degrees around the target and continue firing without worrying about the enemy’s attacks or friendly fire. This was especially effective given the poor rapid-fire capabilities of their muzzle-loaded muskets.

The target could always repel the bullets, but Elkiad did not worry about that.

While the target was focused on defending against the bullets, another unit armed primarily with two-handed swords and halberds would quickly approach. They would break through the enemy’s Magic shield, rendering them defenseless, and make fatal attacks from close and long range.

That was the optimal answer.

Or it should have been.

Just as Boo Boo’s giant body seemed to sway, he had already vanished. He had escaped the lines of fire reaching him from a total of five directions. He was a

Nonhuman, so he did not use Magic and did not use his powerful body to forcibly stop the bullets. He simply dodged.

In other words, no amount of gunfire would hold him still.

“Eh?”

Funnily enough, some of them reacted just like the first guard soldier who had been taken out.

They were the Shining Weapon group that had assumed the target would be held still.

A moment later, a heavy tremor silenced everything.

“…”

After swiftly silencing the close-range group, Boo Boo’s fierce eyes turned toward the long-range musket group.

(H-how did he dodge that? Are you telling me he predicted where we were going to aim?)

Since loading a bullet would have taken too long, they grabbed and fired the spare guns hanging from their belts while falling back, but it was too late.

And the Elkiad soldiers had made a fundamental misunderstanding.

(No, that isn’t the issue. This should be the first time this Nonhuman has seen a gun. He shouldn’t know what will happen if we aim at him. That should slow down his response to the first attack…)

He had dodged it regardless.

Not a single shot had hit him.

(Does that mean… Does that mean…!! He didn’t predict where we were aiming. *Did he see the bullets leaving the guns and then dodge them*!? How is that even possible!?)

The one Elkiad member finally realized his understanding of the situation was a few steps behind, but he was still wrong.

What mattered here was not proving the small details.

It was the presence of such a monster right in front of him. And the fact that his gun was aimed at that monster as an enemy. He should have been using every last mental resource to figure out how he could possibly escape this alive.

But it was already too late.

Before his understanding could catch up to the current situation, Boo Boo approached.

His thick Shining Weapon gave a roar purely as a blunt weapon.

Part 14

The road was lined with brick buildings. The soldiers on the roofs gasped as they set down their large guns and grabbed their sniper muskets.

“What…is that thing!? How is he still alive!?”

Snipers had to do more than just hit a stationary target. The target would be moving to some extent and they had to predict where it was moving when they aimed.

And yet they could not predict the pig-faced giant’s movements.

They had scopes, even if they were handmade from wooden tubes and glass lenses. They could see Boo Boo through the scopes. His four meter frame should have been an easy target. But each time they had him in their sights he would vanish. They would find him again and he would vanish again. The process repeated over and over, so they never had a chance to keep their sights on him and pull the trigger. And he was more than just fast; he was predicting what they would do.

One sniper and the reloader/spotter next to him were dumbfounded, but…

“Well, if you must know, your mistake is in judging all living creatures based on human standards.”

“!?”

They heard a voice behind them.

They quickly looked back, but there was no on there.

“Wh-what? …Hey, did you hear that just now?”

The sniper exchanged a glance with his spotter, but Sutriona, one of the Break News, sighed quietly nearby.

She had entirely vanished from their senses and she added more in her heart.

(From what I’ve heard, he used his four meter body to move freely across the ocean like a skipping stone and he beat up and defeated a thousand-meter Dragon. Controlling that much strength would require quite a bit of processing power. One wrong move and he could tear himself apart with his own strength.)

So Boo Boo just had to direct some of those resources toward the outside world.

A multitude of blades pierced the heavens and a hail of lead tore through the air to punch through flesh and blood.

But none of it could stop him.

Part 15

That great form beat down the rows of enemies.

Even if those enemies looked like slender humans, their strength was thoroughly amplified by Percentage-type Magic: STR +300%, VIT +800%, AGI +500%, *etc.* They were supposedly strong enough to slay a tiger or defeat a bear with their bare hands, but that was irrelevant to Boo Boo.

He was different on a more fundamental level.

He beat down those with axe or spear Shining Weapons, he hit homeruns with the soldiers wielding large muskets, and those human baseballs collided with the

snipers targeting him from the rooftops. He quickly beat up the vanguard meant to hold him in place and he mercilessly used his own Shining Weapon on the rear guard before the healers there could wake up their unconscious allies.

“Hurry! Hurry!”

A short distance away, the Elkiad soldiers stuffed a rocket in a launching tube, pulled the pin, and shouted to steady their own trembling fingertips.

This was a Bo-hiya.

Unlike the muzzle-loading muskets, the propellant was loaded in the actual projectile. After increasing the efficiency with military-style thoroughness, the weapon had very nearly transformed into a shoulder-fired anti-tank weapon.

“Bullets aren’t enough, but he can’t dodge this if he’s caught in the explosion… Do it, dammit! Blow him to smithereens!!”

“We’ll take out some of our own at this range!”

“Have them use a shield or something! That monster hasn’t used anything like that. We need to stop him here, so just do it!!”

The soldier protested, but once he had permission from his commanding officer, he seemed to shift the burden of responsibility away from himself. He rested the launching tube on his shoulder and did not hesitate to pull the trigger.

White smoke scattered and an explosive shaped like a thick stake flew in a straight line toward the far-too-large target.

It happened a moment later.

Boo Boo grabbed the flying rocket from the side.

“Wha-…!?”

All the soldiers gasped.

When choosing a fuse, they had gone with the bestseller of the weapons they were familiar with and used a pressure-sensitive one, but that had backfired.

In other words, the rocket would not detonate unless it received an impact to the tip.

So what if someone could accurately perceive the rocket as it flew toward

them with incredible speed, what if they were blessed with the physical strength needed to instantaneously move their body, and what if they had tough enough skin to remain intact when it grabbed the rocket as it sliced through the air?

Assuming the pressure-sensitive fuse did not malfunction as the rocket came to a sudden stop, wouldn't they be able to grab the flying rocket right out of the air!?

"…?"

Boo Boo did not seem to know what it was.

However, he did seem aware it was likely something dangerous. After tilting his head, he threw it back the way it had come.

"Ah."

The rocket was out of propellant, so it flew in a gentle parabolic arc, and dropped toward the soldiers' feet while obeying its center of gravity. The tip containing the pressure-sensitive fuse landed right on the rooftop.

The explosion occurred a moment later.

Part 16

First, their faces grew red at the reports coming in.

Then, their faces grew blue at the avalanche of backup requests pouring in.

Finally, their faces grew white when all the reports came to a stop.

"L-let's retreat… There's nothing we can do! We can't continue fighting any longer! Let's retreat!!"

"Do you have any idea what you're saying? We must stop that Piece from being registered at all costs!!"

"No. I'm not sticking with you here. I'm not going to die in this distant world! I've had enough!!"

The subordinate who had always been by the man's side turned his back and ran off at full speed.

"Tch. You imbecile!!"

The blonde commander with stubble on his chin reflexively pulled one of the short guns from his belt, raised the hammer with his thumb, aimed it at the fleeing back, and then aimed upwards instead of pulling the trigger.

Deserting under enemy fire was punishable by execution, but those basics no longer mattered.

They were ruined whether they continued on or fell back.

Elkiad was a regular army. Their very presence in Ground's Nir was an extra-legal act not found in the manuals. In other words, the well-regulated army had detested them from the beginning. If they did not achieve results, some kind of nitpicky fault would be found with their actions and they would be purged.

(So we need to secure that Piece. *We have to continue forward if we want to escape!* Why don't they understand something so simple!?)

Fortunately, they had received a certain report early on.

That monster had said he was "going to Beatrice".

And that woman most likely also held the bait Piece that was the key to their survival.

Which meant…

(If I get my hands on Beatrice, I have a way out of this. I can destroy the Piece and I can use her as a shield against that monster. That's the only way. The most dangerous route always takes you to the greatest safety!! Only those who realize that can make it on the battlefield!!)

Once he had a plan, he could act on it.

He ran across the chaotic battlefield and pressed against the brick wall of a building. As soon as he stepped inside, the entire building shook. One of the walls had apparently been broken through. He also heard a creaking sound overhead, so he rushed up the stairs.

There she was.

Three girls were gathered in the center of a long hallway.

They had no real plan. They looked like they would collapse no matter where they went next. Elkiad should have been able to silence them for a perfect game, but something had gone horribly wrong at some point.

The Elkiad commander held his short gun as an outlet for his anger.

As long as Beatrice was there, nothing else mattered. He could shoot the other two dead to intimidate the package from the beginning. And a psychological shock like that would let him take the initiative to use her as a shield.

The short gun held just the one shot, but he had several of them prepared to allow rapid fire with the troublesome muzzle-loading weapons. He immediately pulled a new gun out with his left hand. It made him look like a character from a ridiculous Western rather than a soldier, but now he could kill both of the others at once.

Finally, he placed his fingers on the two triggers.

A moment later, the girls disappeared.

However, they had been too worn down by the battle to use any more Magic. They had not done anything. That meant the irregularity came from the man himself.

Yes.

For example, perhaps the Elkiad commander had broken through the hallway floor and fallen to the floor below.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

Weapon on its shoulder.

“How tough are you?”

“Ha…ha ha.”

“With your Magic, you must be really tough. …So can I go all out when I hit you?”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Ha ha ha ha ha ha

She explained everything: their world had hit a technological dead-end and a single breakthrough could easily change everything, this time that had brought the world to the brink of a great war, and Elkiad had worked to trigger that war while Beatrice's group had done everything they could to stop it.

At some points, she wondered if this was too complicated for Boo Boo, but that was no reason to hide anything. She could have him ask about the parts he did not understand and she could work to help him comprehend it all.

But a gentle look appeared on Boo Boo's face as she explained.

Almost as if he was receiving the answer he was hoping for.

"Then that's fine. I'm glad I saved you."

"I know this is working against me, but do you really believe me? You can't visit our world, so you have no way of seeing if it's true. It's possible the Piece we've created isn't bait and will actually lead to the technology needed to start a war."

"I trust you."

"I see…"

Beatrice sounded relieved.

Boo Boo looked to the exhausted White Witch and Fighter Priest and said more.

"You all look tired. But you might not be able to relax in the inn town, so how about you come back to my house?"

"Good point… I want to get back home to settle all this, but if I register the Piece in my Shining Weapon for now, there shouldn't be a problem. And it is true I want to get away from the inn town to ensure our safety. Filinion, Armelina, is that okay with you?"

As they discussed their plans, they left the half-destroyed abandoned building.

There had been no one out there before, but a large crowd was gathered now.

And they had not gathered out of curiosity or idle interest.

Their faces were covered with fear. That was the seed of hatred. They had not come to see something they liked. That crucible of emotion prevented them

from relaxing until they confirmed the situation and the scope of the threat. And of course, their concerns were not directed at Beatrice, Filinion, or Armelina.

It was Boo Boo.

He was a Nonhuman, an Iberian Orc, and a hideous outsider to the humans of the inn town.

His appearance alone could easily inspire prejudice, but he had also proven his great combat ability. It was clear what emotion people would turn his way.

“Boo Boo…”

“It’s okay, Beatrice.”

Boo Boo stood in front of the three girls and responded to the Holy Swordswoman behind him as those hostile gazes focused on him.

“I knew this would happen, so it doesn’t hurt.”

He had known they would fear him.

He had known they would hate him.

He had only ever watched the festival from the hilltop despite how much fun it looked, but he had set foot inside the inn town to save his friend’s life, knowing full well what it would lead to.

And it had ended exactly how he had known it would.

“This is wrong.” Beatrice’s voice was trembling. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It was Elkiad and us who started this. If they’re going to blame anyone for this battle in the inn town, it should be us! There’s no excuse for treating you like this. You selflessly saved our lives and our world!!”

But even after hearing that, Boo Boo did not look back and simply shook his head.

He had said this did not hurt.

But there was something he most likely did not know. Just like with the Thousand Dragon, he had trusted what Beatrice had to say about this Elkiad business. He thought humans had clever minds and pure hearts. It was a nice thought, but it was not always accurate.

The people had stopped at fear for now.

But what would happen to Boo Boo if it grew into hatred and disgust?

Ground's Nir was an island small enough for a human to walk the perimeter in only three days. If the humans truly felt threatened and decided to hunt him down, there was no hiding.

With Boo Boo's strength, it was possible he could defeat the entire hunting party.

But afterwards, he would surely break.

If he could endure that and if he was the type to have no trouble throwing others into pandemonium for his own sake, he never would have resisted the urge to join in at the festival!!

Part 18

"That should just about do it," said Sutriona up on a rooftop.

The palm-sized Fairy named Meridiana flew alongside her.

"Wh-what's going to happen to Boo Boo? I don't want him to become a pariah!"

"Neither do I, and that's why I came here. It was for Boo Boo. To be honest, I'm not too interested in interfering with a human conflict."

The Break News were paradoxes with souls.

And this girl-shaped one had enough power to mock the Thousand Dragon as "weak".

"But what exactly are you going to do? Oh! Are you going to speak with the humans to give them a change of heart?"

"You moron, I'm also what they call a monster. If I reveal I'm a Break News, it will cause an even greater panic. After all, they treat my very existence as a

paradox.”

The Fairy Queen added an “and”.

The floral decorations of her ribbon dress were based on the red flower known as a Crimson Heaven Flower. She placed a petal of one in her mouth and tore through it with her canine tooth.

“I am thinking of giving Boo Boo some help to show my respect for how he risked his life to protect a friend. But I have no interest whatsoever in kindly protecting the entire human race.”

An odd sound surrounded them.

The next thing the Fairy knew, Sutriona had butterfly-like blood wings. They were human-sized at first, but they quickly expanded and spread so the sinister red wings encroached on the entire sky.

During the Thousand Dragon issue, hadn't it been mentioned that it was a toxin in Fairy blood that intoxicated the wicked dragon?

In that case, what could their queen do?

"There are two ways of erasing a threat from someone's mind."

Sutriona spoke to Meridiana as the Fairy looked up at the gigantic wings.

"For the first, you carefully explain what lies at the center of that threat to reduce and eliminate the fear. Simply put, you patiently argue your point until they are satisfied. But to be blunt, that's a huge pain and the thought of me unconditionally lowering my head to a mere human is simply laughable. And I have no words at all for people who can't even protect their own town, have an outsider handle it, and then treat that savior as a threat a moment later."

"Th-then what's the second way?"

"That should be obvious."

That paradox put her hands on her hips and put on the most vicious grin imaginable.

"You send in an even greater disaster to reduce the impact of the previous one. And I'm used to playing the villain like this. After all, I am one of the Break News."

Part 19

That threat was feared as a scorching red sandstorm.

The instant one was caught in the intense sandstorm, they could not see

anything beyond their own nose. The sandstorm was actually the powerful toxin contained within the Fairy Queen's blood wings. In other words, it was a red sandstorm made up of the pigment in her blood and it was said that breathing in the slightest bit of it would burn away the civilized part of the human mind, transforming them into a pack of wild animals that were slaves to their desires.

The lethal dosage of a poison was determined by how much it could accumulate in that creature's body, how quickly their body could break it down, and one other very simple factor: their body weight. The Crimson Heaven Flower pigment was broken down in a Fairy's blood. Since the amount of pigment in a single palm-sized Fairy's blood was enough to intoxicate a thousand-meter Dragon, what would happen to the humans of the inn town as that red fury filled the entire scene like a sandstorm?

The first to notice it was Beatrice.

White Witch Filinion's support Magic was still active on the edge of her vision.

That Magic visualized the probability of a threat or of running across an enemy.

That value suddenly jumped straight to 100%.

(Wha-…?)

"Hey, what is that?"

The next to notice was an ignorant young man who calmly commented on it. His question was less about wanting to know what this was and more about wanting to gather attention to himself as the first to speak up about it.

Then an older Swordsman's eyes opened wide when his experience told him what this was.

"I-it's a Break News!! It's the unpredictable Sutriona who has no known route! Get indoors now or your brain will be fried!! Hurry!!"

From there, it devolved into a panic.

It may not be the best comparison, but people would not bother to stop a robber or dine-and-dasher when they knew a giant meteor was about to hit. The people who had shown such hostility and malice now scattered and fled. They

dove inside every door they could find and sealed up the doors and windows. The people who did not get in in time pounded on the doors, rattled the knobs, and ran to another building when they realized it was not going to open.

This was only an inn town.

People took turns visiting this world, so no one had an actual residence. The basic assumptions of a normal city did not apply here, so there was no guarantee that there was room for everyone in the buildings.

The people were even more panicked than they might have been because they knew that.

Yet if they looked at it rationally, there would be more than enough room if they crammed as many people indoors as they could.

Beatrice asked a question while agonizing over the number that was wavering between 90 and 100%.

“Boo Boo, what will we do? I doubt anyone will let us in right now.”

“We just have to look at the direction of the wind. Run to the hill and we’ll be safe.”

“Hm? Then why are you headed in that direction? The usual hill is the other way.”

“There are a few other people who are stuck outside like us. You go on ahead. I’ll carry those people to the hill.”

“Do you really think you can do that right now?”

She started to follow him, but not because of the hatred she had seen just a moment before.

She thought they could not save those people if she did not help.

But Boo Boo answered without a moment’s hesitation.

The value of 90% or even 100% did not matter.

“I can do it.”

Part 20

And Boo Boo kept his promise.

The inn town people he saved had complicated looks on their faces, but they at least did not seem ready to do anything about Boo Boo at the moment.

The red pigment clung to the inn town for a while and no one could go outside for the three days it took for the effects to naturally fade. The Fairy Queen had said they would forget about their hatred of Boo Boo in that time and they would be filled with complaints concerning the monster named Sutriona instead.

“Boo Boo.”

Beatrice spoke to him near the leaf house.

He was looking after a campfire and had fish skewered on sticks set up next to the fire.

“I’ve been learning about fire recently. It’s tricky and hard work, but Sutriona gets upset if I don’t do it.”

“What? If you had told me, I could have taught you. Fire is my specialty.”

She sat next to him and looked to the crackling campfire.

After a while, she finally spoke.

“Sorry about all this.”

“Why are you apologizing, Beatrice?”

“I just about left no place for you in this world. In fact, it really would have happened if Sutriona hadn’t cheated her way out of this. I couldn’t do anything for you, Boo Boo. I couldn’t take responsibility for what I started.”

“But you didn’t do anything wrong. You fought to protect everyone’s lives, so I don’t regret it.”

That may have been true.

That commotion may have been small when one considered it was to stop a

conflict on the ridiculous scale of the Atlantic Sovereignty War.

But that was wrong on a fundament level.

The initial conditions were wrong.

“But, Boo Boo, that was about our world. It was nothing more than human selfishness. We were using Ground’s Nir to solve a problem we should have solved on our own.”

“…”

“We brought disaster to your world. We gave you a burden you never should have had to bear. That’s why I’m apologizing, Boo Boo.”

It was on a small scale, it was not happening on earth, and it happened outside human society.

But did that make it okay?

Accepting that was no different from Elkiad who had no problem as long as it was not their country that fell into ruin.

“That isn’t true.”

But Boo Boo disagreed.

Beatrice looked up and he continued.

“If you’re ever having trouble, tell me about it. If there’s something you can’t solve on your own, ask me for help. It doesn’t matter if it’s something from another world. If there’s anything you’re worrying about, I want to help you solve it. So I don’t care if you bring disaster and I’m fine taking on an unnecessary burden.”

“Boo Boo…”

“I mean, we’re friends, aren’t we?”

Part 21

White Witch Filinion and Fighter Priest Armelina observed the two from a short distance away.

“I see. So that’s the Boo Boo that Beatrice is always talking about.”

“To be honest…it would be difficult to have romantic feelings for that, but an intelligent Nonhuman might not be bad for having an acquaintance who isn’t playing the Magic and Pieces game.”

“Oh? So you’re going to sum it up like that? Then why do you look about ready to start meddling just to have some fun with someone else’s romance?”

“Oh, dear. But aren’t you the one that’s started unlocking some delightful aphrodisiac Magic despite not known any Recovery Magic at all?”

A small form appeared behind them.

It was the unpredictable Fairy Queen. She blew gently into their ears and spoke.

“Hey. Mess with my toy too much and I’ll send you to a world of crazed red passion.”

The small circle was slowly expanding.

And it was all because someone had been willing to throw it all away in order to protect someone else.

Chapter 3: Seven Flames and Dragon Eater

Part 1

It might look like happily ever after, but aren't we forgetting someone?

"Bhah!?"

A red sandstorm covered the entire inn town.

That toxic pigment burned away people's rationality and transformed them into bipedal beasts.

Most of the people fled indoors and sealed up the doors and windows to escape the threat. Those who were too slow were carried out of the inn town by Boo Boo.

Sutriona had spread her extraordinary influence to ensure it would turn out that way.

But there were some who did not fit inside that framework.

"Ah, gah…cough, cough!! …gahh…!?"

Elkiad.

A certain nation's soldiers had disguised themselves as a Guild. Most of those defeated by Boo Boo remained collapsed as the red pigment washed over them.

They may have simply been forgotten. Sutriona had no obligation to save them as well and it was unclear if a paradox with a soul even considered this "attacking" them.

"Ha, ha ha…hagh…ha ha ha!!"

The man who had once led Elkiad placed his hand on the wall and slowly

walked forward despite the color red blinding him. His stubble had stood out in the first place, but his rough impression was further increased by his unfocused eyes, heavy breathing, and disconcerting sweat.

The toxic pigment had entered his mouth, his nose, his eyelids, and all of his skin's pores.

Antidotes and Defenses were useless here.

But even without a finishing blow from Sutriona, the Elkiad commander's psyche would reach its limit sooner or later.

There was nothing left for him now that he had failed to stop Beatrice's group and his country could not start the war they wanted in the real world.

He technically could go back, but he would have the take responsibility as soon as he did.

And that would mean something on the level of a "purge".

The bait Piece had likely been registered by now, so that result could no longer be overturned. If he did not want to die, his only option was never returning and living out the rest of his life in Grandnir. If they sent people after him, he would have to fight back.

But there was an unavoidable problem with that.

His former world and Grandnir were similar yet somehow different. For example, gravity, the number of hours in a day, the composition and density of the air, *etc.* Those differences gradually introduced negative effects on the body's structure, especially the internal clock, so staying too long would throw one's mind and body off balance.

Something in him would eventually break.

Faced with this hopeless situation, the former Elkiad commander was not thinking of how to gather his remaining troops for a swift retreat that would minimize the confusion. He was instead thinking of taking revenge on everything that had led to this situation.

He was from Elkiad, the military mafia that had become a crucible of moral hazards.

As the circuits of his mind were burned away, he walked forward like a zombie.

With his future destroyed, he acted only in the pursuit of dark and fleeting pleasures.

Part 2

A week had passed since the commotion Elkiad and Sutriona had caused in the inn town.

Boo Boo walked through the mountain with a large basket on his back. The Fairy named Meridiana had woven the basket together in a single night while he slept, but Boo Boo had not even questioned the tool that had suddenly appeared in his house when he opened his eyes.

Boo Boo was entirely self-sufficient, so half his day was spent in search of food.

———Nest-Building White Squirrel.

“I can eat you.”

———Emperor Poison Scorpion.

“I can’t eat you.”

———Treasure Guardian Rabbit.

“You’re tasty.”

———Ground Spider.

“I can eat you, but you’re really bitter.”

———Giant Lonely Chick.

“I can eat you after you grow up.”

Beatrice grew pale and trembled as she watched Boo Boo dividing up his catches and tossing them into the basket.

She had a feeling the ones ending up in the basket were all soft and fluffy

animals that looked like crane game prizes.

“Ah, ahh, ahhhhhhh…”

“Hm? What is it Beatrice?”

No, she understood. She really did.

This was what it meant to be self-sufficient and Boo Boo would die if he did not eat. And with his great size and strength, he had to eat a lot.

She understood that!! But…

“Kutsu kutsu.” (←Nest-Building White Squirrel)

“Kyuu, kyuii.” (←Treasure Guardian Rabbit)

“Kweh…” (←Land-Walking Penguin)

“Nia nia.” (←Palmtop Lion)

“Piyo piyo…” (←Flightless Chicken)

The array of cutely round eyes burned at Beatrice’s sense of guilt. She could say it would be okay if the animals were ugly, but she felt that line of reasoning would eventually get back to criticizing Boo Boo. At any rate, she could not bear to watch four meter Boo Boo munching on living stuffed animals like they were snacks. It could easily break the solid pillar supporting her world.

(I’m sorry, Boo Boo!!)

“Oops! My hand sliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiipped!!!!!”

She mustered all of her acting skill as she pulled out her rapier-like Shining Weapon and swept his feet out from under him. With a squeal, he fell forward and all the living stuffed animals spilled out of the basket on his back. The round creatures seemed confused and approached her, so she had to raise her Shining Weapon to threaten them. Finally, they scattered and fled.

Boo Boo raised his porcine face with tears in his eyes.

“How could you do that, Beatrice!? All my food got away!”

“Sorry, sorry, Boo Boo. My chronic case of Golf-Swing-on-the-Train-Platform disease seems to be acting up. This happens a lot, so don’t worry about it.”

“Eh? You’re sick, Beatrice!?”

“No, um, you’re not supposed to take this seriously, Boo B-…”

“I know how to make a great medicine. First, you tear out the front teeth of a Cat-Loving Hamster, and…”

“I-I’m fine, Boo Boo!! You’re only going to make it happen again!!”

“?”

But since Boo Boo would die if he did not eat, Beatrice started fishing in the river while soothing him.

(Hmm. So I have no problem putting a worm on a hook to catch a fish? Humans can be pretty cruel creatures too.) A Grandnir fishing rod had no reel or synthetic line. It was simply made, so the line or rod would break if she tried to catch something too large.

“By the way, Boo Boo, are you managing to help people?”

“Yeah. I’m doing what the White Witch and Fighter Priest ask me to do.”

“I see. Good job, Boo Boo.”

“Right now, I’m making a bath for everyone. I go like this to dig a ditch that will pull the river water over a little. Then I dig into the ground so it mixes together with the hot water that comes up from the ground.”

“Hm? A bath…?”

“Baths are hard. When I went to tell Sutriona that dinner was ready while she was bathing, she got really mad. She was really close to killing me.”

“…What?”

Beatrice was bursting into flames, but Boo Boo was entirely oblivious.

That was why he ended up making the finishing blow. More than just fuel for the fire, it was a thermobaric bomb.

“The White Witch and Fighter Priest said they’d give me a witch’s aphrodisiac after I finished helping. I don’t know what an aphrodisiac is, but I think my home could use a first-aid kit and I have to start somewhere.”

“Okay, I understand completely. It would seem a certain White Witch wants to be burnt at the stake.”

Part 3

After they finished gathering food, Beatrice called up a map with Magic and set out for the inn town. She found the town was mostly functioning once more.

She grabbed White Witch Filinion, the soft and fluffy young woman in glasses who was trying to make money through Trading.

“Why are you giving Boo Boo an aphrodisiac? Are you indirectly trying to kill me?”

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaahn!? It was a joke! Just a joke, Beatrice. Besides, it wasn’t for Boo Boo to take himself. He was supposed to slip it into your food, so-…”

“…”

“Okay, Okay, Beatrice. I’ve learned the error of my ways, so can you release me from this iron claw!?”

Filinion trembled and brought up another topic to change the subject.

“B-by the way, Beatrice, I finished deciphering that wall painting.”

“Tell me.”

They moved to the end of the road to avoid getting in people’s way.

Beatrice leaned against a brick wall.

“Was it what we thought it was?”

“Yes. Grandnir has almost no written culture, so I had some trouble with the hieroglyphic symbols. Still, it mostly matches.”

As usual, Beatrice used some illusion Magic to arrange her information using red lines and boxes.

The White Witch pushed at the side of her glasses with her fingertip.

“It seems the Iberian Orcs had a tradition of attaching treats and decorations to trees for celebrations and festivals. Think of it like a Christmas tree. It seems to have developed from a habit of storing their prey in trees to make sure other beasts didn’t steal it.”

Beatrice was oddly amazed that Iberian Orc was an official name.

“Sigh. But tree-climbing animals are everywhere.”

“That seems to be why a certain story is told among the Nonhumans. The Iberian Orc who hid his important prey underground had it stolen by a mole. The Iberian Orc who hid his in a tree had it stolen by a bird. Only the Iberian Orc who suggested they all eat together managed to enjoy his meal.”

“Hmm. In that case…”

Beatrice placed a miniature version of Boo Boo’s leaf house in the empty air and drew out the surrounding environment based on her memory.

She finally reached the small hill and the large tree on top. That was where Boo Boo had watched the inn town’s festival as a child.

“There is one interesting place. That might be the best spot.”

“We don’t have much time for this, so wouldn’t it be best to get started as soon as possible?”

“Yes.”

More than to Filinion, Beatrice was speaking to someone who was not with them at the moment.

She erased her information managing Magic.

“Wait just a little longer, Boo Boo.”

Part 4

“What’s this? There’s nothing but fish for dinner tonight? I’m sooooo sick of fish!”

Right in front of the tent-like leaf house, Sutriona sat at a fire and kicked her feet around while wearing her black ribbon dress without any panties. That dress was a mysterious item made by the Fairies using Ground Spider silk and legend had it the flower decorations opened and closed like they were alive. It was unclear if that part was true, but no matter how much she kicked her feet, the fabric protected her lovely body to an unnatural extent, never allowing a peek up the skirt.

Meanwhile, Boo Boo was fine with whatever he had to eat despite his complaints during the day.

“Fish is good… All the small bones are a problem, but unlike other meat, you don’t have to remove the blood or organs, so it’s easy.”

“Wait, wait! At least take the insides out! Those are too bitter to eat!!”

Sutriona complained, but she must have thought filling her stomach with something substantial would be better than munching on Crimson Heaven Flower petals all night. She puffed her cheeks out a little, but finally grabbed a skewered fish. She tended to act like a queen, but she could not help that when she really was the Fairy Queen and had always had her shrine maidens look after her.

“By the way, Boo Boo.”

“Hm?”

“You carry that Shining Weapon around even though you’re not a human. Why is that? We can’t use Magic, so it seems like a waste.”

“A human gave it to me. I don’t know how to actually use it, but it’s hard and tough, which is really convenient.”

“Hmm.”

The thick mass of metal was over two meters long and resembled a steel beam or a log. It was something like a combination of three or four two-handed swords, each of which would have been heavy enough to smash a helmet. It took

someone of Boo Boo's size to swing it around like a club, but just how much effort would it take for a human to swing it? Using Percentage-type Magic, they could amplify their body's Parameters to the point of lifting a carriage or boulder, but it was unclear why they would choose to use such a large weapon.

"Beatrice was asking about my Shining Weapon recently too. I hope she doesn't say she wants it. Since it's her, I can't just say no."

"Well, I doubt you need to worry about that. Shining Weapons are optimized for their specific user, so she wouldn't be able to do anything even if she did try using yours. …Although that makes me wonder what the person who gave it to you was thinking."

"Even if I don't really get it, I'll use whatever I can."

"How open-minded of you. You're not much for mental games either, are you?"

Part 5

A few days later, Beatrice visited the usual hill while taking a break from exploring the Labyrinth. As usual, she relied on her Magic map.

The large tree had several branches that provided gentle shade to protect anyone on the hill from the sun.

She put her hands on her hips and breathed a light sigh.

She used illusion Magic to place an AR image of their plans over the tree and switched between a few different options.

"Decorating this entire thing is going to be a pretty big job."

"Oh, have you started?"

Fighter Priest Armelina approached from behind. She did not always stay in the same Party as Beatrice and Filinion, so she had likely returned from a visit to the

Labyrinth with a different Party.

“I was just thinking about what exactly we should do.”

“Isn’t tying it up with string our only real option? Wire would probably be easier, but I’d feel bad if our festivities ended up damaging the tree.”

“Yeah, I think it’s going to just be a Christmas tree when we get down to it.”

She and Armelina made a list of what they needed. They did not need any fancy metals for the decorations. It could just be things carved from wood and colored with paint. Boo Boo would be happier if they focused more on the snacks. They would also need a ladder for work higher up on the tree. If they could not find one in the inn town, they would have to build one themselves.

“But do Iberian Orcs really not do this kind of thing? If there’s somewhere at least kind of like our world, I assumed anyone with a certain level of intelligence would come up with the idea.”

“Boo Boo doesn’t seem to have much of a concept of dates. Of course, it seemed to take us a while to figure out that Grandnir has fourteen months with twenty-five days each.”

“That’s because we didn’t need to know that to rush off into the Labyrinth.”

“It’s the same for Boo Boo. He just lives day to day catching food, so he doesn’t need to categorize it with numbers. He just needs to know about the seasons.”

“Really? But you need the concept of dates for all sorts of things: horoscopes, lover compatibility, the day’s lucky color or recommended spot, or-…ah!?”

“…You’re surprisingly into that kind of thing, Armelina.”

“A-anyway!”

After accidentally letting her girly side out, Armelina blushed and frantically waved her hands around.

“Whatever the case, it’s lucky he has that Shining Weapon. If it didn’t have a manufacturing date and a transfer date, we really would’ve been in trouble. They say you can tell an Iberian Orc’s age from their fingerprints, but that isn’t enough to figure out the exact month and day.”

“Right,” agreed Beatrice with a light sigh.

She recalled the word “Iberian!” carved into that thick weapon.

“If that hadn’t been a birthday present, we wouldn’t have been able to celebrate his birthday like this.”

Part 6

“Boo Boo, when is your birthday?”

Back when Boo Boo had still looked like a cute stuffed animal, Beatrice had asked him that question.

He had simply tilted his small head.

“What’s a birthday?”

“It’s the day you were born, Boo Boo.”

“I don’t remember anything from that long ago. Do all humans remember?”

“Hmm.”

Beatrice had groaned when he answered with a curious look void of any emotional nuance.

It was possible his entire race had no real fixation on birthdays. For one thing, birthdays were only considered special inside a social system with a concept of age-based hierarchy and set ideas of what behavior was appropriate for one’s age. In a complete meritocracy, age would no longer hold a special place in society, so the concept of birthdays would be given less focus. …Or that was a possibility anyway.

“Do you know your birthday, Beatrice?”

“September 15. …Although the year is a different length in Grandnir, so that doesn’t mean much here.”

“?”

Boo Boo looked puzzled.

“What good is knowing your birthday?”

“Well, just once a year, you get to be the star. You get to eat cake, eat as much other stuff as you want, receive presents from everyone, and celebrate that you were born on that day. A birthday is a special day that everyone has.”

“Really?”

Boo Boo still did not seem to understand.

When he replied, he did not seem to mean much by it.

“But I don’t think I can do that. There’s no one who knows my birthday.”

Part 7

With help from White Witch Filinion and Fighter Priest Armelina, Beatrice decorated the hilltop tree bit by bit.

Boo Boo had been running some kind of errands for Sutriona lately, so he would not be anywhere nearby.

Filinion supported the ladder from the ground and worked to motivate Beatrice who stood on the ladder.

“We only have three day to go, so we’ll be out here all night if we don’t get all this ready.”

“I know that. The snacks have to be prepared on the day of, so we need to get all this done ahead of time.”

“Uhohoi! I gotta say, the view up a Holy Swordswoman’s miniskirt is pretty amaz-…gbah!?”

“Oops, my hands slipped and I dropped my Shining Weapon. Sorry.”

Meanwhile, their work was progressing smoothly.

The weather had been so sunny that they had not been delayed by rain. None of the Break News showed up to spread their natural disasters, but that may have been thanks to Sutriona's presence.

"That said, Beatrice, you have another present ready for him, don't you?"

"Stop it, Armelina. You just know she's going to tie a red ribbon around her naked body and declare that she's his prese-…gwah!?"

"Oops, I dropped the scabbard too. Can you get that for me?"

She of course did have something for him. And it was of course not a ribbon around her nude body. Since it was generally impossible to carry anything between the two worlds, the only way to get a present in Grandnir was to take on an unnecessary expense by trading with Gertrude, the inn town's treasurer, but it had not been too painful.

"Just three more days."

The people in the inn town were busy delving into the Labyrinth to earn Experience Points and learn Magic, so they would have been shocked to see this.

But that was exactly why it had meaning.

Would she change the world or not?

This had a meaning different from that of fighting over the Pieces that could bring great breakthroughs to stalled technologies.

Part 8

His mind was almost entirely empty.

No matter how much knowledge and skill he had, the intelligence, thoughts, and overall personality needed to actively use them had faded away and scattered.

This was the blond man with stubble who had once been Elkiad's commander.

"…ah…"

He bore the wounds of his utter defeat, he was under the influence of Sutriona's sandstorm of red insanity, and his internal signals had collapsed around his internal clock due to his extended stay in this alternate world. Altogether, he was left in a state where he could not even remember his own name.

But.

That may have been the reason why.

Only the final "direction" in his mind refused to vanish. He used all the data on Grandnir he had gathered as the army of a certain nation disguised as a Guild and he gathered what he needed to continue in that "direction".

He would have his revenge.

He would get back at them.

His unit had been wiped out. He had not seen the other members since then, but either their minds had been destroyed by the insane sandstorm or they had returned to their original world in search of help, been immediately captured, and then been purged.

But that meant little to Elkiad's commander.

On the chess board of war, soldiers were mere pawns. And not even the greatest chess player could complete a game without losing a single piece. So if he gathered his excellent subordinates together like some kind of collection, he could not even begin to fight. He could not let his heart be shattered when they were lost or used up.

So that was not why their commander was angry.

Useless pawns were doomed to be crushed. If a pawn refused to listen, he would knock it from the board himself.

It was something else that scorched the core of his mind.

An Iberian Orc that showed no hint of intelligence had thrown the chess board

into chaos.

To reiterate, war was a chess board and the soldiers were pawns. The commander had gathered everything he needed and used his intellect to challenge his opponent, but his opponent had trampled on his efforts with nothing more than brute strength. That was the worst form of cheating. His score had been crushed and he was now crawling along the ground. It was supposed to be a logic game that pitted one mind against another, but his opponent had achieved victory without using their brain even once.

He would make up for that disgrace.

He would use any means necessary.

"…ah…ah."

Elkiad was an army. The first thing they were to do when deployed was some basic investigation to see what was on the chess board. What kind of place was it, what was the terrain like, what was the weather like, what kinds of dangerous flora and fauna were found there, what kind of people lived there, and what interests intertwined there? Even if they were working in Grandnir, that remained unchanged.

So the Elkiad commander knew what required the greatest focus out of everything in Grandnir: the beings known as paradoxes with souls. Those superior beings were on the same level as a thousand meter Dragon that brought rainclouds or a Fairy Queen that created sandstorms of red insanity.

The Break News came in all shapes and sizes.

Some had wills of their own and some did not. Some understood human language and some did not. Some had humanoid forms and some did not. Some allied themselves with humans and some did not.

Every last one was unique. They could not be categorized by any kind of framework because they each built up a framework all their own.

They willfully reached to their very own peak.

One of those was a sword stabbed into the summit of a sharp rocky mountain. The double-edged sword was as clear as glass or crystal. The Elkiad man

unsteadily approached that monster built up from inorganic materials.

This was the Break News known as Lorelei.

That devilish blade would provide its wielder with infinite power, but it would drive its wielder and their surroundings to destruction through the mass hysteria brought on by overwhelming violence and fear.

Part 9

The promised day had arrived.

Bringing Boo Boo along was easy. In fact, that hill was his favorite spot. Once Sutriona stopped making her phony errand requests, he would have gone there regardless.

“Hm? What is it, Beatrice?”

“It’s nothing.”

“You’re acting all nervous.”

“I-I said it’s nothing!”

The two of them walked through the forest as they spoke.

“Why are you looking at your usual map?”

“Um…good question. This area is something like my own backyard now, but I just can’t relax without this.”

The weather was still sunny.

Her original world was easily changed by the exchange of Pieces, but time flowed peacefully in Grandnir. That was not to say the scenery did not change at all, but it seemed to happen at a pleasant pace, like the corners of a stone being slowly rounded by a river’s current.

(In that way, we may be the ones who have changed the most.)

Beatrice gently smiled next to the four meter Nonhuman.

Boo Boo had been as small as a stuffed animal when they had first met. When she had embraced him, he had squealed so cutely. He had been a crybaby and he had shown his tears when he so much as tripped over a tree root.

It had definitely been a shock when they had been reunited a few years later, but he had not changed deep down. He was surprised by normal things, confused by normal things, and took action in response to normal things. He was her friend.

He had changed.

But she did not find that change to be “bad”. As a resident of a world affected so greatly by Pieces and breakthroughs, that truly seemed like a miracle.

“Beatrice. I want to find one of this big Bucket Ostrich Eggs to eat today. Don’t get in my way like before.”

“Heh heh heh. I think you might just change your mind, Boo Boo.”

“Hm?”

“You’ll understand before long. This way, Boo Boo.”

They walked down the usual path just like always.

The forest opened up and they saw the usual small hill on the gentle mountain slope.

“?”

At first, Boo Boo did not seem to know what it was.

Red, blue, yellow, and other colors decorated the large tree on the hill. It was also surrounded by roasted snacks and sugary snacks still in their wrapping. Below the glittering tree, several large tropical leaves were woven together into something like a picnic sheet. Large plates were covered in meat, fish, and other foods Boo Boo would love.

White Witch Filinion, Fighter Priest Armelina, and Fairy Queen Sutriona were already there. The sparkle at the top of the tree must have been the Fairy named Meridiana.

It was not as gaudy as the awful dinner parties held at the Detached Magic Palace.

There were no precious metals that had no value outside of monetary value.

“Happy birthday, Boo Boo.” Beatrice spoke quietly next to him. “It wasn’t easy without any real reference materials, but we did our best to do this the Iberian Orc way. I hope you like it.”

“This is…”

Boo Boo finally seemed to catch on.

“This is all for me?”

“That’s right. Today is the day to celebrate the fact that you were born. So there’s no need to hold back. You’re the star today.”

“…”

Boo Boo stood there in silence for a while.

He had said he was fine being alone since everyone was afraid of him. He had gone to save a friend even if it meant making everyone hate him. He had always taken it for granted everyone would reject him, so how did he view this scene?

Beatrice would never let him say that kind of thing again.

If he needed emotional support for that, she would gladly provide it.

“C’mon, let’s get started, Boo Boo. You can set aside all the complex stuff and just enjoy yourself.”

She smiled and took his hand.

She then slowly and gently invited him into circle of friends.

She would make him a part of that bright light.

But just before she could, a violent gust of wind blew in.

The dreadful wind carried the scorching heat of melted glass.

For a brief moment, Beatrice had no idea what had happened to her. She had reacted to the approaching sense of danger by reflexively drawing her Shining Weapon rapier, but she was not given enough time to activate any Magic.

She felt a blow powerful enough to strain her arm and orange sparks flew.

She bent more than halfway backwards and lost her balance as a further scorching wind assaulted her.

That wind had a human form.

Only then was she able to raise her voice.

“Elkiad!?”

The smiling man swung both arms for a horizontal strike at her torso. Would she have time to activate her Magic or take aim? Her thoughts moved at high speed as a giant form took action next to her.

It was Boo Boo.

Pressure bore down on the mass of wind.

If the Elkiad man was a red and scorching gust of wind, then Boo Boo's leg was a giant wall that stopped that wind. The glass blade rapidly changed course as the Elkiad man used it for defense, but he and the sword were kicked away like an artillery shell.

After an explosive sound, he struck the ground with enough force to tear into it.

But the blond man with stubble did not stop there. To lessen the damage, he forced himself into a roll and bounced a few times.

He ended up on top of the green picnic sheet made from large leaves.

The large plates of food they had all made for today were knocked to the ground as the man fully negated the blow. Far in the distance, he raised a sinister blade that was not a Shining Weapon. It changed shape from an amorphous whip to a single sword and plenty of red heat filled its clear blade.

"Ha ha."

He produced laughter that had long since left human language behind.

Only a desire for pain and tragedy covered his face and his entire body.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Ha ha ha ha ha ha

Fairy Queen Sutriona fiercely bared her teeth as she viewed the disastrous scene.

But the Elkiad man did not seem to care.

Even though he stood before someone who had readily referred to a thousand-meter Break News Dragon as “weak”.

After all…

“I am a Break News as well.”

The wind roared as the amorphous weapon returned to its sword form.

The orange heat became a refreshingly transparent blade.

The Elkiad man aimed the tip her way with a twisted smile on his face.

“Its name is Lorelei. This is my power now. I am a Break News. So don’t think you can frighten me, Sutriona. You were never my goal. You’re no more than a hurdle.”

A single drop of red appeared.

A small cut had appeared on the Fairy Queen’s right index finger.

“I’m only saying this once: outta the way, Sutriona.”

The transparent blade grew red with heat.

Lorelei transformed into a twisted drill.

“Whether you do or not won’t change how this ends.”

Then the glass blade exploded.

It was a whirlwind once more. It tore into the dirt, sliced through the air, and finally chopped down the large tree on the hilltop. The all-consuming torrent of destruction ignored distance as it attacked Boo Boo and Beatrice.

Even as the danger approached, Beatrice carelessly had something else on her mind.

This was an utter disaster.

The food prepared for Boo Boo had been trampled and the picnic sheet had been torn to shreds. The White Witch and Fighter Priest had nearly been killed

and Sutriona's blood had actually been shed. They had researched Iberian Orc traditions from the ground up and worked hard to decorate the tree for a celebration similar to those traditions, but that tree had been chopped down. The very location that had been a part of Boo Boo's life since childhood had been torn apart.

This was supposed to be a celebration of his birth, so this was like spitting on those feelings.

Time had long since stopped.

What had Boo Boo done?

This might have been his very first birthday, so why did this have to happen to him?

It was true he had opposed Elkiad.

But had Elkiad been fighting from a righteous position? Would anything be improved by digging that issue back up after its conclusion? Wasn't this nothing more than a personal grudge? If this man thought it was okay to ruin all this over a personal grudge and if he could go this far based on that reasoning…

Then he could hardly complain if the same happened to him, could he?

She moved almost frustratingly slowly as she raised her Shining Weapon.

She would not think about holding back.

She would not bother to follow her opponent's regulations.

She cast aside all idle thoughts, forgot even the fact that her own life was in danger, and faced her target. In a world void of sound, she selected the Magic she needed. In a space void of time, she finished setting the target. She gathered strength in her little finger to her index finger, focused on her tightened thumb, and finished her preparations.

Sorry if you die.

But you might as well have pressed the gun to your head and pulled the trigger.

She then released the Magic.

The world regained sound and recalled the flow of time.

A great din soon followed.

Orange flames shattered the approaching red whirlwind like it was made of glass. Not only that, the air was scorched as a mass of explosive heat shot straight toward the Elkiad man. He immediately raised Lorelei, but that blade shattered, leaving him with only the hilt.

His body bounced around like a rubber ball.

This time, he was not trying to negate the blow. He simply flailed his limbs, hit the ground, and tore into the dirt several times as his momentum carried him along.

“Hold on. …Wasn’t that guy using a Break News?”

Fighter Priest Armelina seemed caught off guard.

“He was talking about Lorelei,” replied Sutriona as she pressed a finger to her temple and shut one eye. “It’s true that thing is a Break News like me and it does have the power that implies. …But in exchange for the infinite power it provides, Lorelei shatters their desires. After granting every last one of their ideals, it points out the contradictions in their heart to take it all away. The only way to control Lorelei is to build up the ultimate and perfect theory that lacks even the slightest flaw, but a theory that perfect doesn’t exist when faced with the billions and trillions of possibilities in this world. If you gave a fish legs and wings, would you have an all-purpose creature? You’d only have a pathetic creature that can’t get by on land, in the air, or even in the sea.”

“But…”

White Witch Filinion slowly and hesitantly looked over.

Not at the tragically spilt food, not at the felled tree, and not at the Elkiad man who Lorelei had toyed with and sent to his doom.

She looked at Holy Swordswoman Beatrice.

“Shouldn’t we leave those details until later and stop her? Whether that power is real or not and whether he still has that power or not, I think she’s about ready to go kill him!”

Beatrice took a step out in front of the others.

She used the Magic known as Internal.

As soon as a circle and a word of power appeared on her back, the Magic activated and she vanished. Something like orange flame wings had erupted from the circle on her back and her slender body flew just off the ground with the force of a meteor. She slipped out from between White Witch Filinion, Fighter Priest Armelina, and Fairy Queen Sutriona. No one could stop her as she raced toward the Elkiad man lying on the ground. She planted her heel on his chest.

Then a strip was torn into the ground like when a passenger plane made an emergency landing.

“Gah, gwah!! Aghbagrehhhh

expression fell apart.

"It's okay, Beatrice."

"Why…?"

"I don't want to see any more of this."

"Why!?"

Beatrice shouted at him like a bolt of lightning.

"There's no reason for you to hold back here, Boo Boo. Elkiad came to Grandnir, went on a rampage, and got attacked by you, one of the actual residents of this world. That's all that happened, but as it spun around and around in his mind, he somehow decided he needed to take revenge! This was supposed to be your birthday. This was supposed to be the special day where you could be the star. We were supposed to be celebrating your birth!!"

"…"

"But he trampled on all of that. He trampled on the party, on the special day, and on a place that holds so many memories for you! It doesn't matter whether or not he knew about any of this. You don't have to hold back when this man felt so full of himself that he didn't even realize he was a guest here in Grandnir! Doesn't it bother you, Boo Boo? Year after year, you've longingly watched the inn town's festival while standing here all alone. But he took that scene from you!!"

"Kee hee."

But she heard static instead of the answer she wanted.

Ugly static left the defeated and battered man's mouth.

"Ha…ha ha. What are you talking about? I was wondering what this was about, but what in the hell are you talking about? Longingly watched the festival? Standing here all alone? Are you serious? You've got to be kidding me."

"What…are *you* talking about?"

It may have been better had she not responded.

The Elkiad man was here to have his revenge on Boo Boo and Beatrice. If that

was his one and only goal, the static coming from his mouth could only be a means of tearing into their hearts.

"Humans visit Grandnir to gather Magic and create Pieces. That's how we bring technological breakthroughs back to human society. So would we really waste our time and efforts on a mere festival or parade? If we're going to do that, it has to be linked to the Labyrinth exploration. …For example, when we defeat a powerful enemy blocking the way."

She should have immediately shut his mouth.

She should have hit him, crushed him, and silenced him to end this.

But she had made a mistake.

She had pressed him to continue.

"*So that festival that monster longed to join? I bet it was the one that commemorates the day we wiped out a village of those pig-faced things.*"

Part 10

The world seemed to turn upside down.

Part 11

The color white exploded in Beatrice's mind.

She regretted not slaughtering this man one second earlier.

"…"

But once she thought about it rationally, there were some things that made no

sense.

Where was Boo Boo's family? Where were his friends? Why had she never seen any other Iberian Orcs?

Grandnir was a small island that even a human could walk around in three days. And Boo Boo had said he never approached the never-ending Labyrinth because it was scary. If Iberian Orcs with the same values had a village on Grandnir, they would not enter the vast Labyrinth either. If they were living somewhere on this small island, she should have run across them somewhere.

And yet she had not.

Why was Boo Boo here all alone, as if he had been left behind?

"Yes, that's right. I remember now."

Blood dripped from the Elkiad man's mouth as he continued to smile.

He looked over at the abnormal Shining Weapon hanging at Boo Boo's waist.

"*There used to be someone who used that thing.* Ha ha. Have you been taking good care of it because someone gave it to you? Well, the weapon you've entrusted your life to is the very weapon that had its fill of your family and friends' blood, you dimwitted beast!!"

The memories forming the inner side of Boo Boo were falling apart.

"Not long after Elkiad was established, we hired an external staff member as something like a guide. That's her weapon. I'm certain of it. She vanished after we destroyed the Iberian Orc village, but I'm betting she gave the weapon to you and then left as a way to leave behind the guilt. Ah ha ha. It's a shame. If you'd realized who she was, she might've killed you along with all your friends!"

"Why…?" Beatrice's voice was scratchy. "Why would you do that!? Nonhumans like the Iberian Orcs aren't the same as the lifeless Gimmicks that wander the Labyrinth. And unlike the Break News that are linked to and power the large Traps, they don't interfere with our exploration. So why would you kill them!?"

"Don't ask me. I wasn't in command back then. Well, it *was* a problem how close the village was to the Labyrinth's exit and they *would* sometimes stop

people from going in because they thought the Labyrinth was some frightening place. Those were issues, but…I don't think they were the real reason."

At that point, the Elkiad man stuck out his tongue to provide the finishing blow to a kind heart.

"Hah! Do you even need a reason to slaughter some pig-faced monster in some other world? Why are you even taking this so seriously? Hmm, um, what was it again? Was it because they were so damn ugly? I don't even remember what I was thinking when I shoved those losers aside."

……
……

All of her thoughts were erased.

She tried in vain to think while overcome by an odd floating sensation like even the concept of gravity had vanished.

What day was it today?

The day to celebrate his birth.

Why had she so arrogantly assumed a human could give him something like that? Humans were the ones devastating Grandnir for their own purposes, so they were nothing more than evil invaders to the Nonhumans.

And by the time her scattered mind managed to refocus itself, she heard a deafening sound. At first, she grimaced at the great volume, but once she realized what it was, it tore her heart to pieces.

Boo Boo was crying.

Just like a small child, he was wailing toward heaven at the top of his lungs.

Of course he was. This place from his memories, his memories of watching that festival, the extra-large Shining Weapon he had relied on more than anything else, and everything that supported his heart had been shattered. Of course he was going to abandon all rationality and intelligence.

All that would remain was the great violence that had confronted the Thousand Dragon and destroyed Elkiad.

“Oh…”

I’m going to die here.

That realization came to Beatrice.

What other option was there? The humans had slaughtered Boo Boo’s true family and friends, innocently pretended to be on the side of good and justice, lifted him up further and further with the laughable farce of a birthday party, and then tossed him into the abyss at the worst possible timing. The fact that they had not known or that they were from a different group only mattered from a human point of view. After having everything taken from him, Boo Boo would view all humans the same.

“I’m dumb…so I don’t really get it…”

Finally, Boo Boo spoke while continuing to sob.

There were hints of anger in his voice.

What was there left for him to question? Why something so cruel had to happen to him? How humans could do such evil with such ease? Or why the puny and hideous creatures known as humans should be allowed to live?

Beatrice imagined all sorts of verbal abuse.

But what he said next betrayed every last one of her expectations.

“I can’t figure out if I should really hate humans here!” he said clearly. “I can’t figure out if I should really go on a rampage here!!”

Beatrice could not believe it.

She doubted her own ears and brain.

After all that, there was no way he felt no anger. His entire body was trembling and she could see a definite light of rage in his teary eyes.

But he was suppressing it.

Even when faced with such evil, was he refusing to release himself?

“Why, Boo Boo?”

The Elkiad man no longer mattered.

She stepped back from him, turned her back on him, and faced Boo Boo directly. She spread her arms while holding her Shining Weapon, leaving herself defenseless.

“You can kill us. You can kill us humans!! Doesn’t it bother you? You’ll never be satisfied if you don’t, right!? There’s no reason to hold back, suppress this, and live on in pain. We’re not worth that. Surely you understand that!!”

“It’s true the festival, the Shining Weapon, and everything else have fallen apart. There’s nothing pure left and everything I’ve relied on has been pulled out from under me…”

Boo Boo spoke while biting his lip.

“But you said you’d be my friend. Even if everything is gone and those memories were built on a lie, you haven’t disappeared. So I don’t want to stop being your friend! I don’t want to go on a rampage here and break that one last thread!!”

“Boo Boo…!!”

“I’m dumb, so I can’t make up my mind.”

He had the tearful look of a child lost in an unfamiliar city.

“I think I’m doing something wrong here. I think it’s weird not to do anything when everyone was killed. But...I don’t care if it makes me dumb or a coward. I just can’t bring myself to do that!!”

Only then did Beatrice finally remember something.

After rescuing Meridiana from the Thousand Dragon, Boo Boo had said he was afraid of justifying his violence, losing control, and becoming an unfeeling monster. He feared he would become someone who killed for more than just living and eating.

“Don’t be silly, Boo Boo.”

When he had revealed that, how had she replied?

Yes, that’s right.

“I won’t let that happen. We’re friends after all.”

Beatrice finally found what she needed to do.

She knew what she had to do and how she had to guide him as his friend.

“You aren’t dumb, Boo Boo. Nor are you a coward. You found the smartest answer of anyone here.”

If he was trembling because he was afraid of crossing a certain line, she just had to gently push him back from that line.

If she wanted to continue to be his friend, she had to answer with a smile.

This would settle it all. She would bring it all to an end.

But just as she thought that, something else happened.

The sound from directly behind her was a truly quiet thing.

The Elkiad man had guided the tip of the devilish Lorelei blade to the girl’s back.

Part 12

She did not understand.

This time, her mind truly went blank.

“Ha…ha ha.”

She heard laughter.

But despite what the Elkiad man wanted, not a single drop of blood flowed from Beatrice’s back. Lorelei no longer had the power needed to form a proper blade. It was like being poked by a stick, so it caused no real damage.

But what if?

What would have happened had Lorelei been at full power?

What would have happened before Boo Boo’s eyes after he had chosen to stay by Beatrice’s side rather than take revenge for his parents and friends?

(Oh…)

Was this that same cruelty?

Unsatisfied with just trampling on his precious past, had the man tried to break Boo Boo's will to continue into the future in order to drench everything in spilt blood?

Beatrice did not care in the slightest that he had tried to take her life.

She understood that he had just about defiled something far more precious.

So…

“

”

The next thing she knew, she had completely lost consciousness.

She truly did not know what had happened.

At some point her position had changed, Sutriona and the others were nowhere to be found, she was gripping her Shining Weapon rapier with rage, and she was facing Boo Boo who held his weapon that resembled a steel beam

or log.

Boo Boo seemed to be standing protectively in front of the Elkiad man.

Beatrice glanced over at the man who looked like nothing more than a bag of blood and she practically growled at Boo Boo.

“Move, Boo Boo.”

“I won’t.”

“I have to kill him. You don’t have to do it yourself. As a human, I’ll clean up the mess we made. So you don’t need to worry about anything.”

“I decided I would stay your friend. No matter what.”

They glared directly at each other.

And her four meter friend made an announcement.

“So I won’t give up on you. I won’t let you cross this final line!!”

One of them was the Dragon Eater, an incarnation of violence who had defeated the Thousand Dragon.

The other was the Seven Flames, one of those at the level cap with 14,000 forms of fire Magic at her disposal.

Those two always walked side by side, but now they clashed head-on.

Part 13

Beatrice was the first to move.

She held her Shining Weapon rapier tight in her hand and used it to select some Magic. Instead of trying to get close to the extraordinary mass of muscles that was Boo Boo, she made an attack that could defeat him from a distance.

Metal Jet.

This was the same as the bestseller when it came to anti-tank weapons. That

is, a shaped charge. Those used more than pure explosive power to break through a tank's armor. After directing the vectors in a single direction, the metal that had been vaporized from the intense heat was ejected like a sharp spear. That opened a hole all the way through the thick armor and then burned through everything inside.

A metal jet would normally be at most a few dozen centimeters to a few meters long.

But when it was directly created with the power of Magic, those assumptions were easily overturned.

Meaning…

It looked like an orange glowing laser.

Eight of them scorched the air as they shot toward Boo Boo from eight different directions.

They traveled well over a thousand meters.

But when faced with that extraordinary power, Boo Boo simply spun his body around to nimbly dodge the deadly lines of heat. Not only that, he used his thick Shining Weapon to hit a nearby mass of stone. It was smashed to pieces and a downpour of sharp fragments flew toward Beatrice's slender body.

Beatrice ignored them.

Internal.

A magic circle and powerful words danced around her back and orange wings erupted from them. That transformed her body into an artillery shell. She skimmed just off the ground as she shot forward. All the while, she dodged the pebbles from an even lower position.

Melt Cutting.

The Shining Weapon's blade glowed orange. As she approached her target along the shortest route, the girl adjusted her grip on the blade that was now such a powerful heat source that it could melt steel like butter.

Boo Boo also ran forward with weapon in hand.

His feet gouged into the ground and he released all of his muscles like springs to tear through the air.

With a deafening roar, the giant beast and the girl's Shining Weapons finally met. They did not bother locking blades. They crossed paths a few more times, explosions of sparks scattered each time, and they finally moved to the side in order to escape the clash. They maintained their short distance from each other as they ran parallel along the field.

It was an empty field.

White Witch Filinion, Fighter Priest Armelina, and the bloody and beaten Elkiad man were not here. This world belonged to just the two of them.

That may have been why Beatrice decided to get serious here. She threw out all mercy.

"Blossom, great flower. Reveal the seven trees."

The scenery entirely changed.

It all became a disconcerting round arena surrounded by orange light. It was a collection of the Icons for all of the Magic that Beatrice could use. The towering walls surrounding her were tree diagrams of Magic. There were seven sets, each with two thousand entries.

These were the Seven Flames. This was the ultimate pot of death that would use any means necessary to burn to death all who were trapped inside.

"This is your last chance, Boo Boo."

She spoke calmly in a voice that seemed to be cursing the world.

"Move."

"I won't."

That immediate response was followed by Magic.

Cluster.

She held her Shining Weapon high and a brilliant light was launched up by the tip. It burst like a firework more than two hundred meters up and it scattered fireballs evenly in every direction. Those fireballs similarly burst, burst, burst, and

burst some more, ultimately filling the sky with 150,000 lights.

What happened next could not have been clearer.

Every last one of them stabbed into the ground, filling the surface with the color orange.

After an incredible explosion of flames, a wave of heat and a shockwave swept across the field. As far as the eye could see, the scenery was covered with flames, like a forest fire had broken out. And even after that transformation, the scenery was further distorted. The colors of the surface and the sky were both overwritten with that of flames.

And all of this was mere preparation.

Surrounded by the world of flames and the countless Icons, Boo Boo was all alone.

Standing in the center, the Holy Swordswoman faced him like a queen.

But Boo Boo did not fall back.

If he gave up now, he knew Beatrice would fall into an unreachable abyss with that dark look still in her eyes.

“Then let’s do this. Prepare yourself, Boo Boo.”

“That’s my line. My attacks are heavy, Beatrice.”

After speaking to each other, their clash resumed.

Heavy roars erupted one after another.

Part 14

Atop a distant hill, the palm-sized Fairy named Meridiana viewed the intense fighting in a daze.

The entire battlefield was covered in roaring fires.

If Beatrice was abnormal for producing those flames, then Boo Boo was abnormal for continuing to fight without being pushed back by those flames.

Meridiana wanted to know how this could have happened.

This was Boo Boo's birthday, everyone had worked hard to celebrate it, and they had only wanted to see the look of joy on his face. So how did that lead to a fight to the death with the person closest to him?

"L-Lady Sutriona! Please stop Boo Boo and Beatrice! At this rate, neither one of them will escape unharmed. With your power, you can-…!!"

"Don't ask the impossible."

The Fairy Queen bluntly rejected the idea.

"I specialize in the insane sandstorm that burns away people's rational minds,

but there's nothing I can do faced with this vortex of air. It isn't easy for me to interfere when nothing I do could reach them."

"Th-that can't be…" lamented Meridiana

White Witch Filinion also had a grim look on her face.

"And one way to effectively decontaminate a chemical weapon is with the high temperatures of napalm or a thermobaric bomb. In the face of that much firepower, Sutriona's pigment might be neutralized by an intense oxidation reaction."

Beatrice had been cornered by Elkiad's group combat in the inn town, but that was an issue of compatibility. She could indiscriminately spread largescale damage all she wanted, but there was nothing she could do about a bullet slipping through the gaps. And if Beatrice had gone all out there, most of the inn town's people would have been caught in the middle.

With the Thousand Dragon, it had been a simple matter of mass. Even if she tried to roast its giant body from the surface, it could have extinguished her flames like stepping on a cigarette butt. Not to mention that the Thousand Dragon specialized in flight. If it escaped to the sky and repeatedly swooped down like a meteor, she would be worn down before she could burn it.

But this was different.

She was a representative example of the level cap group who claimed things only truly began at Lv. 99. She had countless nicknames and she was especially feared as the Seven Flames which pointed to her ability to use 14,000 types of fire Magic. Overall, she was one of the humans at the top of the rankings.

Sutriona scratched at her silver hair with one hand.

"To think an issue of compatibility would show up with such pinpoint precision here. There's nothing I can do. Human, do you have anything up your sleeve like that?"

"Well…"

"*While I can't say no,* it isn't anything that can restrain that."

The White Witch and the Fighter Priest were also at the level cap, but that did

not mean they could do the same thing. For one thing, humans formed Parties and Guilds to make up for each other's weaknesses with their own strengths. When a fight broke out within a Party, the outcome was strongly related to their compatibility.

Simply put, Filinion and Armelina could not defeat Beatrice in a straight fight.

"Which means…" said Meridiana.

The Fairy Queen shut one eye and continued for her.

"We can only pray to that Iberian Orc and to a god that may or may not exist. We can only pray that his birthday isn't ruined any further."

Part 15

Beatrice used her stock of 14,000 to rule over the fire.

Boo Boo was surrounded by hellfire in all directions and he only had his own arms and his Shining Weapon to rely on. And since he could not use human Magic, he could only swing it around like a club.

The situation was hopeless.

He did not have even the slightest chance of victory.

Or so it may have seemed.

The flow of fire was the same as the flow of air. It flowed downstream, it sought an exit from a sealed space, and it would move on its own. The situation was not that simple since flames themselves would cause the air to expand and create their own air currents and since Beatrice's Magic could directly manipulate those flames, but it had more to do with fluid dynamics than with thermodynamics. It was the same as closing colored smoke in a giant tank and stirring it up with a stick to create air currents. The visualized fluid moved as it liked.

And Boo Boo had the physical strength to beat a thousand meter Dragon out of the sky.

With a roar of steel, the orange world was torn from Beatrice's control.

"——————!!"

With a horizontal bat-like swing, the flames wrapped around the weapon like sticky syrup. The world of inescapable death was stirred up and a slight safe zone appeared. The arms holding the Shining Weapon continued on to tear through the air a few more times. With each blast of wind, a mass of orange was released and it rushed toward the Holy Swordswoman that was supposedly in control.

The girl did not even take a defensive stance.

In the instant of impact, the orange flames that resembled molten metal burst into a million pieces.

"It's useless, Boo Boo."

Her voice sounded like a deadly curse.

"My Percentage-type elemental defenses give me 100% Fire Resistance. …That means no flames can ever hurt me. If you thought some trickery was enough to kill me, you're sorely mistaken."

"But you can't kill me either. I can't do that kind of thing since I'm dumb, but your flames can't reach me now."

"Oh? Have you gotten used to the heat?"

Beatrice adjusted her one-handed grip on the Shining Weapon and held the rapier out horizontally. She placed her empty hand atop the bladeless tip.

Had he noticed?

Had he noticed that the crimson Holy Swordswoman had secretly woven in some illusion Magic? Had he noticed the multiple red strings and boxes recording each and every action he had taken thus far? Had he noticed her keeping score and looking for a way to perfectly break through, as if researching the idiosyncrasies of a baseball pitcher?

And then the silver and red haired girl spoke.

“Then how about I cool you down, Boo Boo?”

First, there were three small and simultaneous explosions in three different directions around Boo Boo.

Next, an unpleasant sensation ran through the back of his giant neck.

A moment later, he jumped to the side like he had been physically struck.

After a sound like cracks running through glass, an ominous light was released into the space he had just vacated. Boo Boo did not stop moving. The same phenomenon continually attacked him. When the leaves fluttering through the air were caught in the crossfire, they shattered like a dropped piece of glasswork.

“This is called laser cooling…but I guess you wouldn’t understand since you grew up here in Grandnir.”

Her eyes glittered in the light of the flames as they pursued the giant form fleeing left and right.

She was targeting him.

“At the most basic level, heat is molecular vibration. By firing lasers at a single molecule from three or four directions, that vibration can be reduced to zero. … That’s what I’m doing here. The only difference is I’m using detonations instead of lasers and doing it on the macro level instead of the micro level.”

Altogether, this was the Magic known as Icing.

This was not supplying energy to burn the target or reducing energy to cool it. It was supplying energy yet freezing it. The Holy Swordswoman had forcibly stuck to her field of expertise to obtain this level of extreme freedom.

“!”

As Boo Boo continued to dodge horizontally, his body suddenly bent at a right angle.

He had made an unexpected dash straight forward.

The world of pure flames was gone. He wanted to put her in check before she could add more extra and uncertain elements to the stage. His methods were not wrong, but he had misjudged the situation.

A moment later, a line of light shot from heaven to earth.

Boo Boo's entire body was mercilessly struck by a lightning strike that reeked of ozone.

"Thunderbolt… This one's a lot simpler. By applying a rapid vibration to the soot blown up into the sky, the static electricity quickly accumulates. Once it passes a certain point, the lightning will pierce the ground on its own."

"…Gh…"

But Boo Boo still managed to move in close.

He made a horizontal strike with his extraordinarily large Shining Weapon, but Beatrice did not even bother dodging it.

She used Fair Wind. By creating intense heat and whipping up the wind, she gave an extra push to the enemy attack so they would lose control.

The great strength Boo Boo used to swing the weapon caused him to pitch forward. Just as he lost his momentum, she suppressed the decelerated attack of the Shining Weapon itself.

Normally, she would have been blown away by Boo Boo's strength, but lightning powerful enough to split a great tree had only just struck him on the top of the head. That had briefly sapped his strength.

And then the Holy Swordswoman's lips moved and her words slipped out into the world

"Weasel Cut."

A whirlwind became a collection of vacuum blades.

This was another attack that used the cooling and heating of the air to create extreme changes to the air currents.

If anyone other than Boo Boo had been caught by that, their flesh and blood might have been torn from their bones.

"Since I can only use fire, some dimwitted fools think they can earn an easy victory if they build up plenty of Fire Resistance, but I make quick work of them."

Everything she used started with fire.

But Beatrice had reached to all other Elements from there.

With nothing more than fire, she could achieve attack, defense, support, healing, disturbance, and anything else she might need.

Boo Boo took a few unsteady steps back.

He could push forward against any enemy, but here he was forced back.

“This is how I’ve survived so long.”

Beatrice’s Shining Weapon cut slowly through the air.

She drew a large circle.

She pointed the flat tip of the rapier toward Boo Boo.

“I’ll only say it once more. …Move, Boo Boo. I’ll kill that evil man myself. Not to stop the screaming in my heart and not to comfort the lost souls of your friends. There is simply no reason to let him live when he’s willing to shed blood and elicit screams for his own enjoyment. Nor are we obligated to let him live. This son of a bitch claims it’s only natural to take things from people, so it’s time I taught him the pain of having something taken from him and then sent him to hell.”

“…I won’t move.”

His tough skin was torn in places and he was clenching his teeth, but he still raised his extraordinarily large Shining Weapon.

“I don’t need that. If he wants to take things from me, than he can. I’d be sadder letting you take things from people than to have things taken from me.”

“Then…”

Beatrice tightly clenched her back teeth as the tip of her Shining Weapon swayed ominously.

“You’ve never done anything wrong! So why do you have to resign yourself to having things taken from you!?”

She gave a roar as she spoke.

“You need to protect those things!! Just like you protected everyone around you! It’s okay to protect yourself too!! Who’s going to blame you for raising your fists for that!? If someone calls you a monster while watching from their safe

zone, then they're the crazy one!!!!"

She released an especially large piece of Magic.

Forest Fire.

An orange line appeared on the surface behind her. It extended to the left and right and then a dreadfully hot and thick wall of fire erupted upwards.

The wall of fire passed by the red Holy Swordswoman who had superb Fire Resistance and it rushed toward Boo Boo.

The massive collection of fire resembled a forest fire and it approached at over sixty kph. Instead of burning an individual, it filled a space several kilometers across. Instead of defeating someone, it swallowed them up. This Magic reached warlike overkill levels that far exceeded what was needed to explore the Labyrinth.

That meant this was over.

As the wall of flames approached, Boo Boo spun around and tried to swing his extraordinarily large Shining Weapon, but it was no use. The threat of a fuel-air bomb was its wide-area blast as well as its application of thorough damage with a blast that lasted far longer than that of a normal bomb. Similarly, this fire was *long*. It covered too wide an area to dodge and, once the target was swallowed up, it would wear them down no matter how much they clenched their teeth. Even if they made use of two or three different defense and evasion techniques, these surefire flames would still swallow them whole.

(Boo Boo. You did quite well.)

Beatrice spoke in her heart as her dark eyes watched the final moments.

(But this is a human issue. It's a conflict between ugly, ugly humans. So, Boo Boo, you don't need to hesitate here. I will release the flames just before you die. By the time you wake up, all of your sorrows will be gone.)

That was what she thought.

But something else happened a moment later.

Boo Boo's giant body rotated and his Shining Weapon gave a roar as it twisted the laws of the world.

“Wh-…?”

The Holy Swordswoman saw something like a giant dragon (one of the legendary Eastern dragons from Beatrice’s world, not one of the Dragons that actually lived in Grandnir) coil around the Shining Weapon which resembled a steel beam or a log.

By the time she realized it was the fire wrapping around the weapon like syrup scooped up by a spoon, Beatrice’s Forest Fire collided forcefully with Boo Boo’s fire dragon.

“…at!? That’s…Boo Boo!!”

He held his ground.

No, he pushed back.

He could use no Magic and he could only produce a gust of wind with his great strength, so where had this energy come from?

Faced with this unbelievable sight, Beatrice made calculations with frightening speed.

(To gain the advantage of the field effect, I started by covering the entire area with flames for kilometers around us.) The battlefield had fallen apart. Thanks to Boo Boo’s rampage and Beatrice’s powerful Magic, the stones had crumbled, giant holes in the ground showed where explosions had occurred, and plenty of other signs of damage were present.

What if none of that had been done at random?

Just like a cold wind blowing down from a mountain and just like clear water flowing through a canyon, what if *a route had been created to redirect all of the scattered heat into a single focused point that could then be released all at once?*

When the flames had stickily wrapped around his Shining Weapon like syrup, hadn’t they been compared to fluid dynamics more than thermodynamics?

(Is this like destroying the dam to let the water wash downstream!? But this had to be his first time seeing most of my Magic. And his actions are one thing, but he would have needed to accurately predict my actions and work them into

his plan…)

She put her own questions on ice.

She was surrounded by seven tree diagrams. Those 14,000 Icons were symbols of the Seven Flames. Counting each and every one would have been too much work, so they were simply there to overwhelm the enemy with their great quantity. However, they were still a tree structure. They were not arranged at random.

(Don't tell me he read them.)

Beatrice shuddered as she looked at Boo Boo beyond the colliding flames.

The truth dawned on her.

(He's doing more than just fight. He's moving accurately, guiding my movements, and yet analyzing my tree diagrams at the same time!? Each time I use a piece of Magic, he notes where in the tree diagrams it came from, figures out where the Magic would develop from there, and finally grasps the entire tree structure!?)

Boo Boo was not stupid.

His body was extraordinarily large even for an Iberian Orc and he had the incredible strength needed to beat a thousand meter Dragon into submission. That was a powerful advantage, but it also contained the risk of mistakenly breaking his own bones or tearing his own muscles.

Thus, Boo Boo was constantly forced to perform highly accurate calculations in every part of his daily life.

As a result, he did not have the resources to spare for unnecessary thoughts.

And that daily mental work had endlessly expanded his intellect. The more he trained his mind, the stronger it got. If he released all of those resources, knowing it would destroy his own body, his thoughts could easily derive the very laws of the world!!

"How, Boo Boo…?"

Beatrice slowly shook her head.

The collision between massive flames gradually shifted in Boo Boo's favor.

The orange wall approached her.

"How can you draw out this much strength and this much intelligence for that monster of a man!? If you used all this strength for yourself, you could have been king of Grandnir. You could have taken all the Pieces for yourself and indirectly rearranged our world to your liking!!"

"I'm not fighting for him."

That voice should have been drowned out by the overwhelming explosive roar, but it somehow reached the Holy Swordswoman's ears.

"I'm fighting for you. I can fight if it's for you."

"…!!"

Just as Beatrice tried to shout back at him, the fire crossed a decisive line. It all started to envelop the Holy Swordswoman.

(That's fine then.)

The will to fight did not vanish from her eyes. She had 100% Fire Resistance, so no amount of fire could harm her. That meant she could use its bright light and explosive roar as a smokescreen to rush straight at Boo Boo. She would aim for the moment of relaxed tension as he gained the upper hand. Then she would knock him unconscious.

(If you're going to selfishly wish for my happiness, then I'll selfishly wish for your happiness. So I won't hesitate. Boo Boo, I will kill that evil man and bring you happiness even if it means crushing your dreams underfoot!!)

But…

But…

But…

Just as the wall of flames struck the slender girl, she was knocked back despite her 100% Fire Resistance.

"Wha-…!?"

This time.

This time her mind truly went blank.

No amount of flames had any chance of harming her, yet she had just been pushed straight back as if by a gust of wind. What had Boo Boo done!?

(Wait. *A gust of wind*?)

The flames were controlled by air currents. It was more about fluid dynamics than thermodynamics.

Beatrice had 100% Fire Resistance, but she had no Resistance against any other Elements.

And she had previously tormented Boo Boo by producing attacks of other Elements despite starting from a foundation of fire.

In other words…

“This isn’t…Fire… It’s a different category. Is this the Wind that accompanies a wave of heat…!?

She bent backwards from the blow.

The hand holding her Shining Weapon was swept outwards, so she was briefly left defenseless.

In that instant, Boo Boo ran straight into the hellfire he himself had created.

He charged toward Beatrice despite the damage to his own body!!

Part 16

It was his first and last chance.

His deceptive strategy would not work a second or third time. More importantly, Boo Boo’s stamina would not last long enough to create the same situation again. It was already a miracle he had gotten this far in a scorching hell that would have killed a normal human of dehydration a hundred times over.

That was why the shortest and quickest route was his only option.

An unpleasant roasting smell rose from all of his skin and stabbing pain covered his entire body. But he clenched his teeth. It was okay if he was burned by the fire he had created. It did not matter if he collapsed the instant the battle was over. If, that is, he could get just one attack in on Beatrice. He had to stop her here and prevent her from crossing that decisive line.

But…

(Oh…)

Time seemed to stop.

His eyes met Beatrice's and he raised his Shining Weapon with all his might, but his mind was filled with anguish.

(At this rate, Beatrice will die!!)

The shortest and quickest route was the only way to get his attack in.

But that would mean pouring all of his strength into the blow, so he could not hold back.

The attack would be meaningless if it killed her.

Holding back would be meaningless if the attack did not hit her.

While he was caught in that dilemma, Beatrice forcibly worked at correcting her backwards bent pose. After recovering her center of gravity, she began aiming her Shining Weapon rapier. From beginning to end, she prepared her weapon for a counterattack. Even if Boo Boo's Shining Weapon split her skull, she would still get this attack through. That intent stabbed sharply into him.

Boo Boo stopped considering the naïve possibility that Beatrice would use extraordinary defense Magic to weaken his attack and allow her to miraculously survive.

One of them would fall here.

There was no other possibility.

(No…)

He did not have time to clench his teeth.

He did not even have time to alter the path of his Shining Weapon.

(No!! I don't want you to kill anyone and I don't want anyone to kill you! I don't want a life be taken for such a worthless reason!!)

The final moment had already begun.

He could not step down from the stage now.

It was Boo Boo's Shining Weapon vs. Beatrice's Shining Weapon.

The two crossed paths to end the final moment.

And in that instant, bluish-white light burst from Boo Boo's Shining Weapon.

It almost seemed to be responding to the Iberian Orc's grief.

That steel beam or log of a weapon was forcibly removed from the accurate route Boo Boo had imagined. It was an unnatural movement, as if it had been repelled by an extremely powerful magnet, and an unpleasant cracking noise came from Boo Boo's arm. The bizarre phenomenon pulled his entire body over.

But that slightly delayed the decisive moment of death.

As his Shining Weapon veered off course, it swung toward the back of Beatrice's hand instead of her head. It targeted the Shining Weapon rapier she held and repelled it.

Without a moment's delay the giant Shining Weapon reversed course and flew toward Beatrice's surprised face.

The pain, the shock, and the brief pause brought by those things were all woven into this second attack. It was a routine not found in Boo Boo's self-taught repertoire. The thoughts flowing into him knew the Iberian Orc body even better than him and specialized in tactics using that giant body.

(What is this…?)

Boo Boo felt like he was watching someone else fight, but something arrived in the back of his mind.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm so sorry this is all I can do."

Were these Boo Boo's memories or were they a sort of data stored in the Shining Weapon which could use Magic?

"When it came down to it, I could only give in to the system and destroy your village."

"So I doubt this will suffice as atonement, but I want you to at least take this."

A story was silently revealed to him.

He received a new revelation about the identity of what he had relied on for so long.

"The souls of those I slaughtered are all stored as data in this Shining Weapon."

"If you wish to recover from this, then find a way to call them back to the land of Grandnir."

The divided internal world and external world cleanly fit together.

Time began to move again.

Boo Boo once more held his weapon. He was not borrowing knowledge or technique and he was not controlling the weapon as a possession. He was becoming one with it to fulfill his final goal.

He would save his friend.

It was something anyone would want to do, but only he could do it here.

"Beatriiiiiice!!!!!!"

He slammed the thick Shining Weapon toward her surprised face.

This was sure to knock her out, but he would not let it kill her. It was a strange bit of mechanics only possible for an Iberian Orc that could manipulate such a giant club like an extension of his body.

With a great roar, the Holy Swordswoman was knocked to the ground.

With that, it was all over.

Epilogue

Boo Boo's entire body was covered in lacerations and serious burns.

His wounds would normally have been too severe to survive, but White Witch Filinion reigned supreme in Grandnir.

She opened her Mixing first-aid kit and pulled out newly-made compresses, bandages, medicines, and other frightening things. She then roughly applied them to his giant body.

"Squeeeeal!!"

"Yes, yes. Keep crying, keep crying. I'm intentionally disinfecting your wounds so it will hurt. I have to make sure you don't get a taste for heroics like this."

The main battlefield had fortunately shifted from the forest to a field, but that field had been burned away. Beatrice had been caught by Sutriona at the worst possible time: when her head had cooled and normal guilt had come rushing back. The girl in a black ribbon dress who looked ten had performed a fifteen-move combo of professional wrestling techniques on her, so she was lying face-down with her hands guarding the back of her head and her butt sticking up.

Fighter Priest Armelina was tracing her fingers along Boo Boo's Shining Weapon. That said, it was the size of a steel beam or log, so she could not pick it up. She was circling around and around it while it was stabbed vertically into the ground.

Palm-sized fairy Meridiana asked a question as she flew around.

"Um, is what Boo Boo said correct?"

"It isn't my Shining Weapon, so I can't say for sure… But it's true that it's only ever had one piece of Magic registered in it and that it's mostly filled with some other data. You normally want a fair bit of spare space for stability when using your Magic, but this is filled almost to the limit."

Boo Boo's Shining Weapon was no longer glowing with a bluish-white light.

It only looked like a mass of cold metal. Boo Boo was not sure what it meant for there to be souls inside it.

Sutriona spoke up while elegantly sitting on the Holy Swordswoman's hips.

"Well, to be honest, I can't tell you much when it comes to human Magic. … Mh. But if what Boo Boo said is true, it means the previous owner created quite the twisted situation."

"So where exactly are we supposed to start with this?" asked Meridiana.

Everyone's eyes turned to White Witch Filinion who was still healing Boo Boo with Magic.

But…

"Hmm. I do have a few Resurrection types, but it's better to think of them as performing CPR with a 100% success rate instead of bringing the dead back to life. Not even I know how to mess with a soul that's completely lost its physical body."

"Yes, that's more a Necromancer thing than a Healing one," said Sutriona. "Although they use the dead while they're still rotten, so even that is a long way off from real resurrection."

"B-but didn't the previous owner give that to Boo Boo because there's a way to do it?"

"No, no. If they had had an actual solution, wouldn't they have resurrected the souls themselves? They probably had their hands full just storing the souls and couldn't find a perfect solution, so they passed responsibility onto someone else."

Holy Swordswoman Beatrice, White Witch Filinion, and Fighter Priest Armelina were all at the Lv. 99 level cap, but they had not perfectly learned all Magic out there. Since they were challenging the Labyrinth and earning Experience Points on a daily basis, they clearly still had a ways to go.

In that case, it was possible there was something located further down the many tree structures that organized the great quantity of Magic.

They might find a miraculous piece of Magic that freed the many souls enclosed in the Shining Weapon and perfectly resurrected them.

“Boo Boo.”

Sutriona finally got off of her, so Beatrice stood up and asked a question.

“Do you want to see your family and friends again?”

“I’m dumb, so I don’t quite get it. Is it really okay to bring back dead souls? And would it really be right to just leave them trapped inside the Shining Weapon?”

He slowly shook his head and finally said something more.

“But if it was possible, I would like to speak with them at least once more.”

“I see. That settles it then.”

Beatrice smiled a little.

She would not be devastating Grandnir for the sake of her own world. This was not the same as succumbing to a desire for revenge and killing someone without even hearing him out. She would truly be raising her Shining Weapon for Boo Boo’s sake. She was thankful to have this opportunity.

“Boo Boo, humans need a huge number of Experience Points to learn Magic and that’s why we have to enter the Labyrinth. We do it by disarming Traps, defeating Gimmicks, and finding Treasure in chests. Do you know what I’m trying to say?”

“No, I don’t really get it.”

“Well, what I’m saying is…”

She said it.

She smiled.

Holy Swordswoman Beatrice reached out her hand and made an invitation.

“Let’s go to the Labyrinth together, Boo Boo.”

It was possible humans alone could not reach the true depths of the Labyrinth.

It was possible a Nonhuman like Boo Boo could not discover the secrets of Magic.

But if they worked together, nothing was impossible.

Afterword

And with that, this is Kamachi Kazuma.

The stage this time is an alternate world and the main activity there is exploring a labyrinth! …For some behind-the-scenes information, I felt my story structures were getting too complex with A Simple Series, The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village, and The Unexplored Summon://Blood-Sign, so I decided to steer in the opposite direction this time.

I made the battles and story as simple as possible.

But there had to be a Kamachi Kazuma style twist to things.

What could be simpler than exchanging video game magic attacks and a protagonist that's all muscle? And a lot of you probably noticed, but none of the male characters in this story, including the protagonist Boo Boo, were given an official name. For a little more detail, this too is a part of the story structure. And try to restrain your surprise over the fact that, "Hm? Then…Thousand Dragon, you were a girl!?"

I included a number of "twists" to things, like the truth of the festival and the secret of the Shining Weapon, but the biggest and most obvious might be making the Labyrinth a complete black box and not having a single scene set inside it even though it's central to the setting. I just find the inns and weapon shops around a labyrinth so much more appealing than the labyrinth itself…

Yes, the hurdle I set up for myself was to see how much information I could leave out (e.g. leaving out male character names, avoiding scenes depicting the Labyrinth, keeping the battles simple, and giving basic names for the magic) while still having a functional story. This was a test to see if I could solve a problem I've been having with my books lately: the number of pages keeps getting out of hand.

The Break News quite literally have broken powers, but I did my best to not

create an all-out “most powerful” character this time. Someone who is flustered and easily defeated in one chapter will display hellish fury in another chapter. I felt I had to include the enjoyment of finding your impression of a character changes based on the viewpoint. True to a fantasy story, the battles had a lot of freedom, so I hope you enjoyed them.

By the way, you might have noticed familiar elements here and there: Boo Boo putting himself in danger to save someone close to him and two worlds divided between magic and science is a lot like A Certain Magical Index. A different Break News displaying its unstoppable power in each chapter is a lot like Heavy Object. The Labyrinth’s Traps and the Break News being unwittingly linked is a lot like The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village. Finding a horrible secret behind one’s normal memories and weapon is a lot like A Simple Series. A heroine falling in love with an orc protagonist and the troubles that brings her is a lot like The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage. A violent heroine who is willing to burn down the world and kill for the happiness of the protagonist is a lot like The Unexplored Summon://Blood-Sign. Instead of making something entirely new after cutting away all my previous methodologies, I lined up all of the weapons I had built up over my life as an author and only then focused on smoothing out the awkward corners that always show up when creating something new.

After that, I worked at demonstrating the things I could only do with this story.

I wanted to show a never-before-seen side of Kamachi Kazuma.

I wanted to create the ultimate capsule that would allow the readers to smoothly swallow a theme or a story that would normally stand out as odd and be difficult to accept.

I hope I managed to set my sights on a story like that.

By the way, Boo Boo’s principle throughout the novel is that he will kill to eat (or to preserve his or his allies’ lives) but he will not allow it for any other reason. It is an extremely harsh and dry thought when summed up like that, so did you manage to smoothly swallow it?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-

san, and Anan-san. Thank you all for continuing to work with me! This had to have been a pain with the weapons, armor, and the increased level of nonhumanness. Thank you for everything.

And I give my thanks to the readers. I was already adding in some nonhumans with Intellectual Village and Blood-Sign, but what did you think? I hope you were able to accept it.

And I will end this here.

I get most excited while thinking up the broken powers for the Break News…

-Kamachi Kazuma

The Weakness of Beatrice the Level Cap Holy Swordswoman That Made Being the Strongest Even More Trouble – His Name? Boo Boo

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